

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE INFINITY RACE



SIMON MESSINGHAM

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE INFINITY RACE



SIMON MESSINGHAM

Welcome to the Selonart Trans-Global Regatta – The ultimate sporting event in the universe!

The Doctor is in trouble. He has his own race to win. Stuck in a parallel dimension, pursuing the mysterious Sabbath, he must unravel a complex plot in which he himself may be a pawn.

Following the only lead, the TARDIS arrives on Selonart – a planet famed for the unique, friction-nullifying light water that covers its surface. A water that propels vast, technological yachts across its waves at inconceivable speeds. All in all, an indulgent, boastful demonstration of power by Earth's ruthless multi-stellar corporations.

Is Sabbath's goal to win the race? Who is Bloom, the enigmatic Selonart native?

As the danger escalates, the Doctor realises he is being manoeuvred into engineering his own downfall. Is it already too late for him?

This is another in the series of original adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

The Infinity Race

Simon Messingham

This book is dedicated to JULIE,

patience incarnate

Thanks due to Caz, as ever.

Justin and David

And especially Alex Kirk. . .

A belated thanks to all who served on our cruelly neglected masterpiece of comic irony:

Tales of Uplift and Moral Improvement.

Contents

[Prologue](#)

5

[Chapter One](#)

14

[Chapter Two](#)

25

[Chapter Three](#)

38

[Chapter Four](#)

51

[Chapter Five](#)

65

[Chapter Six](#)

79

[Chapter Seven](#)

92

[Chapter Eight](#)

105

[Chapter Nine](#)

119

[Chapter Ten](#)

132

[Chapter Eleven](#)

145

[Chapter Twelve](#)

158

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

171

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

185

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

199

3

Contents

4

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

213

Prologue

The thing is: we screwed up and now there's a boat on the TARDIS console.

How is this possible I, Anji, hear you ask.

I'd thought, no I was *convinced* I was out of this. Back at work, getting my life together; tamed, settled. . . moored. The world a normal place again.

My life like my job: compartmentalised, structured, accountable.

That was what I wanted.

What I got, was Siberia and the Doctor.

And now. . . *now* (because it's gone beyond flying around the universe running down corridors doing good, it's gone beyond anything rational or understandable), nothing will ever be the same again. Thanks to the Doctor, thanks to all three of us, thanks to that. . . pain in the proverbial, Sabbath, reality has been corrupted. Reality has been blown wide open and no one, least of all the man around whom all this stuff revolves, has the faintest idea of how to sort it out.

Which I find more than a little frightening. I just want to put that on record.

You see, back in the old days (which despite the dangers and the evil

and the general unpleasantness are, in my jaded brain, indeed beginning to merit the adjective ‘good’), one would always have the knowledge, the ambition, the general feel good feeling that no matter how bad it got, no matter how much you were convinced you were about to be horribly killed and the universe destroyed, somehow the Doctor would get you home.

And now there’s no home to go to. Or if there is, it’s as if some deranged and mischievous streetcorner chancer, perhaps tripping on a mild psychedelic substance, has stroked a surreality squeegee across that home, applying a wash over the world, knocking it out of joint, slipping it out of the corner of one’s eye and all the other clichés that generally come to mean that we’ve screwed up and now there’s a boat on the TARDIS console.

‘It’s a clue. It must be,’ says (oops, *said*) the Doctor.

5

Prologue

6

‘It’s a boat,’ I said back. I was sulking, what with my world being altered forever and that kind of thing. ‘Clues are clues and that’s a boat.’

‘It’s a trick,’ said Fitz. ‘A damn dirty Sabbath trick.’

The Doctor squinted at it. ‘How did it get here?’

We’d been looking at the boat for some time. Staring at it, walking warily around it, swearing at it (me, I’m afraid). Meanwhile, the TARDIS just hummed away, as if it had placed the thing here itself to taunt us. This intruder.

I suppose I’d better come clean. The boat was, of course, a model boat. A small one, about fifty centimetres long and twenty wide. A slim, powerful, streamlined thing (because as you’re undoubtedly aware I know sooo much about boats) that looked very fast. If it had been real. And big.

As for my question, the Doctor responded with a statement so preposterous that he was obviously ducking it. He snapped his fingers and nodded his curls.

What he said was, ‘It’s a souvenir. That’s what it is.’

‘Let’s get rid of it,’ suggested Fitz, looking wary. ‘It’s clearly a trick. And a trap.’

‘And more,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘But it’s our only clue.’

‘How did it get here?’ I asked again, refusing to be ignored. I mean, it was my life he’d plucked me out of. I felt, what with the Earth being altered, the time-lines going doolally, with the still unbelievable (and patently daft) idea that now England was ruled by a different monarch than the one I remembered, I felt like someone had vandalised my home and I would never, no matter how much I redecorated and did it up, never feel safe in it again.

The Doctor was rubbing his chin, peering at the boat on the console. ‘Oh I think it’s quite safe. . . ’

‘Doctor!’ I yelled. Yes, perhaps I was starting to lose it a little. I don’t remember exactly how I was feeling. Just a vague, cold numbing sense of panic as the foundations that underpinned my life were slowly and delicately removed. ‘How the hell did it get here?’

He rubbed his nose and looked at me as if he’d only just realised I was going mad. ‘Well, obviously Sabbath left it here. It’s a trick. And a trap.’

‘That’s what *I* said. . . ’ said Fitz. ‘How? How can he get into the TARDIS?’

‘I don’t really know. Sabbath, if that is his real name, is a man of many parts. To be honest, I don’t know how many parts. Extraordinary fellow.’

Prologue

7

And for a moment, I saw nothing but admiration written on to the Doctor’s face. Which is when I got really worried.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘You maintain that this. . . it. . . this boat. . . is a souvenir.’

‘That’s correct.’ (Ooh, so smug).

‘Well then, clever-clogs. A souvenir of what?’

Banard was sweating as he powered down the ship. These mists into which they had landed were unnatural; somehow. . . curious, like probing fingers.

There was a sound here, a hum or a cry of despair that rang around the mind. A warning to unwary travellers. A sound that crawled into the brain and probed for weaknesses. A sound like death.

Not for the first time Banard wondered if he had made a big mistake coming to Demigest.

He flicked through the visual monitors lodged in the base of the hull.

Outside, the surface was nothing but misty, barren, dead creases of rock littered with broken-teeth boulders. The occasional dry trunk of a blasted, petrified tree groped upwards; branches twisted and curled as talons. The mountains beyond were sheer white horrors reminding Banard of nothing less than the peeled fleshlessness of skulls. All in all, not a nice place. And whatever walked here, well. . .

They had dropped through the atmosphere undetected by any electronic means, Banard knew that. It was his job. His ship went beyond stealth; it was stealth.

But whatever ruled Demigest was reputed not to need electronics to track down its trespassers.

No one came here. Not ever. Only Banard would dare, and even then only for vast amounts of money. Demigest was off limits, out of bounds to all but the inner core of the Empire's galactic cartographers. Something terrible happened on Demigest once; something Earth liked to keep a secret. This little lost planet, once supposed to be a colony and now locked up tighter than the emperor's mother.

Banard activated his ground camouflage mechanisms and waited as the black shutters slid silently down across his bridge-viewing plates. He resisted his natural human instinct to shudder. He was a professional and his reputation said that he was a man without fear. Without mercy and without morals too, but mainly without fear.

This job was a lot of money. Time to wake the guest.

Prologue

If ever there was a man less suited to traversing this haunted terrain, Banard would have to search long and hard to find him. His passenger was like a florid barrel: big and round and stuffed with rich produce. Banard was stringy and lean, knocked into shape by a thousand covert missions. So how come, he thought as he swung his SMG round his sweat-drenched back, how come he's ahead of me and dry as a bone?

The passenger looked back, eyes dark and piercing. There was a strength in him, something tense and dangerous. He may have been a barrel but he was packed tight with muscles. Not as decadent as he liked to appear.

Banard knew an assassin when he saw one. There was also a calmness about this stranger, clad as he was in his absurdly sumptuous black velvet robes.

He looked like a stage magician, someone who knew show business. Banard knew nothing about show business. He only knew about business.

The pair clambered quietly up the mountainside. The strange hum, that distant shriek, wailed louder now, unsettling Banard. A death cry that never died. He kept blinking and looking round, waiting for a dark shape to come out of the mist.

What did live here on Demigest? And why would this stage magician want to come looking for it?

Banard had picked up the passenger after almost a year of intensely complicated and secretive negotiation. Banard did not advertise his services. One didn't, unless the day came when they legalised smuggling, the slave trade, drug running and good old-fashioned safaris. . . well, new-fangled planet-hopping village-destroying peasant-shooting safaris, then. And, of course, going places you're not supposed to go. Otherwise known as trespass.

They had met, at last, in orbit around Proxima II, with Banard's stealth ship hidden inside an old EdStobb space freighter. The passenger had waltzed up to the hull under the noses of several gunpoints and said snootily, 'Is this it?

I had expected something a little more up to date.'

Needless to say, Banard hadn't taken this dismissal of his stealth ship particularly well, especially since it had taken many years, a lot of money and even more bodies to piece together. 'Still,' the passenger

had continued in his warm, amused voice. ‘I suppose it will do.’ And had proceeded to hand over the electronic transfer for a ridiculously large charity donation. Banard’s charity.

The plan, in the end, was simple. Just fly the passenger to Demigest. No names, money no object.

Prologue

9

It had taken three months to find out the planet even existed. A further one to establish that if ever there was such a thing as a planet that was as tightly guarded as a bank vault then this was it. Something really bad must have happened here.

Not that Banard gave a monkey’s. Because in two minutes he was going to stop, see what kind of credit the passenger had on him, kill him and then get the hell off-world. Why not? He had the cash for the job – the transaction had been completed on the stealth ship just before their hike. Why hang around here climbing up a mountain waiting for whatever it was that lurked here to come knocking? This place gave him the creeps.

Watching the passenger begin to haul himself over yet another boulder, Banard stopped and unclipped the silenced auto he kept hidden inside his Kevlar.

As if sensing something, the meaty passenger ceased his climb and turned, staring at the gun as if this was the biggest joke in the world. Well, on this world it probably was. Banard found himself breathing hard and plastered with sweat. Must be the rarefied air; this thick clammy mist. The planet’s wailing seemed louder now, drilling into his head. He blinked to keep his concentration. Just shoot him and get away.

‘Time for a breather, is it?’ asked the passenger, like he’d caught Banard stealing sweets.

‘You got any money?’ Banard wiped his forehead with his gloved hand.

‘Maybe I’ll let you go. You know, if you’ve got money.’ He wouldn’t, of course.

The passenger shook his head, as if disappointed in Banard. ‘Never

carry cash.' He smiled. 'I'm like the king.'

'Shut up,' Banard snapped, taking aim. 'We're alone.'

'We live as we dream, alone,' said the passenger, his voice lowering just slightly. 'Except on Demigest. Where our dreams catch up with us. The Warlocks have been watching us since we landed.'

The passenger raised a jewelled finger and pointed. Banard heard a noise, a sickening overripe kind of noise as something moved towards him from what seemed to be the mist itself. Something black.

Banard had time to scream. The kind of scream that recalled long-buried childhood nightmares, all of them all at once; and the realisation they were all true.

Prologue

10

The passenger sat back on the rock and munched an apple. He only occasionally looked over at what the creature was doing to Banard. It was whooping with an animalistic squeal as its busy rotten fingers in their flapping ancient rags went to work. It couldn't contain its excitement.

The passenger wasn't squeamish; just that this kind of activity gave him little pleasure or diversion. Luckily the mist muffled the worst of Banard's screaming. The mercenary lived a surprisingly long time, considering what the creature was doing to him.

When it was over, the passenger threw away the apple core, where it hissed and curled up brown on the damned rocks of Demigest.

'All done?' he asked. He hopped lightly off the rock and stepped over what was left of Banard. As he stared at the hooded creature hopping and capering in front of him, he became suddenly serious. 'I brought you the offering. Take me to the Inner Citadel. I have all the seals and rituals of acceptance. You may not refuse me.'

The creature hissed and took a step forward, expectant light glinting in its puffy, empty eyes. The passenger produced a small phial of a translucent golden liquid. The creature ceased its bony noise and fell to the ground. Its teeth chattered too quickly inside its skull. It sounded like a drill but the passenger guessed it was some form of talking.

'I'm on my way to a day at the races,' said the passenger, light and friendly once again. 'I want you to help make sure I win. . . '

Marleen Kallison was riding through the great grasslands of Kent when the summons she never expected to receive in her lifetime came through.

She had been putting herself through a punishing pace, ever more aware of the need to work to keep herself fit. At forty-three she could not rely on luck. And maybe, yes, she still wanted to look good.

She had left London three days before and planned to ride for a further two. The genetically augmented mare she'd bought over in Wyoming was of a breed reputed to be the toughest ever born. She wanted to see how far she could push her.

The sparsely populated British Isles were a rare treat. Despite the strict weather-control policies, the imperial meteorologists could not fully contain nature's own haphazard schedules for this grassy little island and there was a delight here in not knowing quite when clouds would form and the sweet-scented rain fall.

Prologue

11

A visit to Earth was even more of a rare treat, and one she intended to spend wisely. Kallison's more general duties were something of a bore to her, even though her timetable was perpetually shifted to keep her busy.

Some customs patrols, a lot of admin and the occasional big job. These last missions were always dangerous and always successful. The Service liked to test her, to keep her on her toes. The last one, the execution of a Mars government tax inspector, had been particularly close; especially considering the Service had warned him of her imminent arrival. They liked to do little things like that. Humorous things, just in case the real summons eventually came, which of course it never would.

Until it did.

Kallison hauled the mare up at the approach of the atmosphere shuttle.

The horse whinnied angrily at the craft as it swooped overhead,

fanning the savannah around them. Kallison dismounted and watched it touch down.

She wiped damp blonde hair out of her eyes.

Probably nothing, she thought to herself, convinced there was no point in getting worked up. Probably another political, some lunatic colony governor getting too big for his boots. Or perhaps some orbital manager fattening his income with a little drugs trafficking. Certainly not the one. Not *it*.

The atmosphere craft flew her back to London. The clean white streets beneath her gleamed in the weak sun. They touched down at the Piccadilly airfield, an armed chauffeur ready to drive her to Whitehall.

Only once at the lift did they leave her alone. Kallison wondered what cover story they had been given; who they thought she had been summoned by. She waved her hand over the ident controls and stepped inside. She kept her hands from shaking.

With a shift of gears, the lift doors snapped shut and she was heading down, down to the sub-level that didn't exist.

She knocked at the door of the empty office, feeling stupid, like the naughty kid she had once been. The only sound was the hum of the fantastically advanced monitoring computers.

Kallison had only been here a few times and each one heralded the commencement of a process that always ended with a secret and illegal assassination.

'Come,' ordered a single male voice.

Kallison entered the room. 'D' was sitting behind the desk, the only place she had ever seen him. He was a man of indeterminate age, could have been Prologue

12

thirty, could have been fifty, and he always wore the same grey suit. His face was utterly forgettable, even the little goatee beard did not stamp an impression on your mind. Until he gave you his full attention. When that happened you thought you would never forget him. He had a smooth, easy power. Something crouching and wise and dangerous. It was only later you realised you wouldn't be able to identify him if you tried. Kallison wondered sometimes whether they

gave you some kind of drug.

She sat down without invitation. There is one feature, she was thinking.

The rings; the jewelled rings on every finger.

'He is here,' said 'D' and Kallison felt a gnawing start up in her stomach.

Had she heard right? Just like that?

'D' handed her a bland file. 'Everything you need. We have traced his movements. If he isn't there yet, he soon will be.'

Kallison nodded and flicked through the file. She successfully repressed the conflicting sensations inside her. Carefully, she read through the file. 'I understand,' she said.

He stared unblinkingly at her. 'Do you also understand that although you have trained all your life for this we do not expect you to succeed nor survive the encounter?'

'I do.'

'You understand you are to use any means necessary to achieve your aim and to consider yourself and anyone else disposable.' His voice was calm and utterly unemotional.

'I do.'

'D' nodded.

'All travel arrangements have been made.'

You leave for

Selonart this evening. I doubt we shall meet again, though I wish you every success in this most important and historical of missions.'

'Thank you.' Major Marleen Kallison understood she had been dismissed.

'There is one more thing,' said 'D' suddenly, and for the first time she thought she detected emotion in his voice.

'Yes?' she asked.

'D' handed over another file. Kallison opened it up to see a sheaf of notes accompanied by a series of photographs, some dating back over two hundred years. They were vérité pictures of seven different men: an old white-haired one, a boyish imp, a velvet-jacketed dandy, a wide-eyed madman, a sad gentle dreamer, a chubby arrogant clown and a sly little schemer. Kallison reverently touched each picture in turn.

Prologue

13

She was astonished to be given access to this reference material. Even she, with her rank in the Service, had only witnessed these photographs once before.

'D' observed her reaction. 'Yes, Major,' he said. 'You may consider it highly likely that you will be bumping into him.'

Chapter One

Bloom sat in his boat that wasn't a boat and felt the vast ocean currents flowing around him. Bloom was going to stay here for as long as it took. No way, no way would they find Bloom here.

Overhead, Whalen's dinghy flipped and flopped in the bay waves. Looking at that from the harbour, what do you see? Yeah, just dinghy. Nothing but.

Earthers pay no more mind. Earthers not like Bloom. Earthers *thick!*

Ah, but look closer. Under the tamed and lapping harbour waves. Under the water's oil skein and dots of floating garbage. Beneath and attached to dinghy: a rope laced round a ring. Rope leads down under water. . . to Bloom in hiding! How sneaky was Bloom? Bloom and Whalen. Mates.

Plan was: Bloom sits out race this time, avoids Earthers' press gangs. It was the Tide for that. For the Race.

More this Tide, many more. He'd watched them dig through the blue, cloudless sky in their big, bright Earther sky-boats and drop, skimming across the water down to the Marinas.

Same as it ever was. Bloom had never been in a sky boat, never wanted to.

He needed to be near the water. To touch water. Sometimes he thought the sky was another ocean, an upside ocean. An ocean what dropped Earthers.

Already the Earthers were flooding the Marina, filling up the hotels. Some of his fellows worked in the hotels, making them ready, turning their pools and bars into mini-Earths 'cos Earthers didn't like not being on Earth. Not like Bloom, Bloom likes being on water. So many people, every time Bloom was surprised. Earthers treat us badly. Why, Bloom did not know. What have we done to them?

Bloom was afraid of Earthers and he wasn't doing the Race.

Whalen brings food.

Bloom looked out at the ocean through the round window of the old bathyscape. Smelled of grease and metal in here. Smelled of Earther. He spread a thick hand across the porthole glass, feeling the liquid in that too.

14

Chapter One

15

The warm feeling of movement. Odd to be seated in such an ungainly way, cut off from the living water.

He had a big lumpen head had Bloom. More so than his mates. Third Jen they called him, Bloom the only one. In an empire where ugliness had been abolished, Selonarts, with their clumsy gaits, large angular heads and thick hands, were considered grotesque. Blockheads.

The water outside the porthole is *pale* water. Many different kinds of water, Bloom knows that. He doesn't have words for all the different kinds. . . water don't need words, but Bloom knows the difference. He can feel it. Water around the Marinas, those sparkly, brittle-looking towers that rise from the waves of Selonart, is pale water. Tamed water, thin and turquoise. Nice and placid and pleasant. Light and warm, water to see through and enjoy.

Bloom prefers the wild water, dark blue, out there out beyond the grip of people and the clanging shipping bells and buoys that mark out man's territory. A huge blind submarine muscle of water, barging its way at punching breathless speed through the deep. Thick, thick

water dark as night, dense as ink. Cold too, a cold that crushes with speeding icy fingers. Water that takes no prisoners. Bloom closes his eyes and imagines himself in a cocoon of this deep angry pitch-black squeezing merciless water blasting its way across the depths of the planet. Here he is a bullet. It is here he would feel truly at home.

Bloom closes his eyes and feels the wildness of the ocean currents, the geometric untrammeled energy out there in the depths. Not for him the Race. Not this time. He will sit this one out. He will sit and dream of the ocean torrents. All sorted.

A sharp ringing on the porthole glass breaks Bloom from his reverie. How long he has sat there he does not know. Bloom looks up to see a blonde-haired Earther, hair streaming like seaweed. Blue neoprene face mask and snorkel turn him grotesque. The Earther looks through the glass at Bloom and nods. He turns and other divers in their clumsy swim-gear glide in for a look at this reverse aquarium. Bloom hears tapping on the bathyscape hull and knows, as he supposes he always did, that he will be participating in this year's Race after all.

Even this far down, the sea was still the light blue of a rich man's swimming pool. With its bright sun and the water's famed special properties, these oceans kept their human-friendly azure transparency. Through the slightly Chapter One

16

shifting, slightly blurring current came a streamlined, yellow-painted vessel, the ping of its sonar sending ripples of sound across the vast ocean.

The Earth ship *Gallant*, one of the last of the paradoxically named 'extra-planetary class' submarines, glided effortlessly through the thin sparkling water, engines barely running. To an outside observer, this vessel, illuminated as it was by columns of bright sunlight refracting through the layered seas, would have seemed to be almost sliding along its course. It was as if the water was somehow less dense than it should have been, that some weight was lacking like a sketch waiting for the heavy trawl of a paint brush.

Selonart was a quiet planet, considering its size. No native life, not even fish. Attempts to propagate some species into these light waters by the original Earth settlers a hundred years ago had been costly, unexciting failures.

Quiet and calm and lots and lots of water, that was Selonart.

Until the race of course, when suddenly Selonart became a very important large, watery planet. Which was why the *Gallant* was here.

This was not exactly, what Captain Cho had in mind when he had been given command of this strange, almost anachronistic type of vessel. A submarine in an epoch of space colonisation? Almost silly, except well, how else do you get under the water of a planet, Earth or otherwise?

Captain Cho had commanded the *Gallant* through the labyrinthine deep water croesium mines of Balax 3, nosing the sub through pitch-black freezing water, the honeycombed tunnels collapsing all around. He had led the famed lightning raid on the sub-marine temple complex of Amphi-Khalesh, rescuing a dozen planetary governors from the genetically altered water-breathing fanatics holding them hostage. He had experience. He had an impressive CV.

And now? Now what were they doing, this battle-scarred tub and its nerveless crew? Running errands for galactic playboys and their toy boats.

Patrolling a dead water planet just in case something nasty could, might possibly, conceivably, be lurking here ready to interrupt their fun.

It seemed a geo-sat had scanned an anomaly in this southern sector of the Selonart oceans. An anomaly that scrambled instrumentation that swept across it. Some piece of dark, sub-aqua blankness. It could have been anything, Captain Cho knew that. Earth techies relied too heavily on their orbital trinkets, thinking them fool-proof. Until now, when they needed the Imperial Marine Navy.

‘A fool’s errand, Mr Johansen,’ Captain Cho said to his Number One.
‘A Chapter One

17

ridiculous humiliation, bringing us here.’

Lieutenant Johansen, a bulky Scandinavian, nodded his agreement. His ruddy bearded face was criss-crossed with scars earned in the numerous campaigns across humanity’s daring galactic expansion.

Captain Cho was himself smooth-skinned, with a light brushing of his Japanese ancestry. Had he possessed a sense of irony, he would have found it ironic that he, the Imperial Marine Navy’s most decorated

officer, hailed from the Martian colonies, a planet devoid of any kind of surface water. The fact that he had no sense of irony, nor humour, probably contributed to the fact he was so decorated.

‘We are making incredible speed,’ said Johansen. ‘Well over sixty knots.’

‘The famous Selonart water. Reduce power to one-quarter.’ Johansen looked up from the neon screens into which he had been staring. ‘We are already at one-eighth,’ he said, almost unbelieving.

The bridge was cramped but well lit. Johansen was permanently stooped, a habit ingrained from years of tucking himself in here. Captain Cho was the shortest man aboard and also the most lithe. He lived for submarine work.

He had never known anything like this.

Cho placed his hand on a bulkhead. The metal was cool and soothing under his palm. ‘There’s hardly any vibration at all,’ he said, almost to himself.

‘How can this be?’

One of the head-setted technicians, Ingham, suddenly looked up sharply from his display. ‘Something on the sensors, sir.’

‘On general,’ Cho ordered.

The screen that dominated the bridge, usually streaming through lists of numbers detailing the sub’s status, flexed once and was replaced by a sim of their sensor sweep.

‘I don’t see anything,’ said Cho.

‘Readings are odd,’ replied Ingham. ‘Fluctuations on all energy wavelengths. . .’

‘There!’ shouted Johansen. He pointed at the sim. At the edge of the screen, the electronic image flickered and wavered; a slim lance of nothing-ness that blanked out the sensors.

‘We’re heading towards it fast,’ warned Johansen.

‘Cut engines,’ ordered Cho.

Immediately, the sub was filled with the whine of deceleration. The

bridge lights flashed, then re-energised themselves. Captain Cho rubbed his smooth Chapter One

18

chin.

'Could be some kind of cloaking,' he mused. 'But why?'

'Doesn't look like a vessel,' said Johansen. 'It seems to be spreading out.'

Like a cloud or something.'

Now Cho used that image as a reference point the confusing signals made sense. The blankness, the power that outwitted their sensors, was indeed mushrooming out like a cloud. Captain Cho suddenly had a very unpleasant thought. 'It couldn't be a nuclear explosion. Could it?'

Who the hell would detonate a nuclear weapon on Selonart?

'Orange alert. Go to orange alert.'

'We're still moving. . . ' said Johansen, calm and unhurried. The warning klaxon sounded twice round the submarine.

'Fine,' said Cho. If it was nuclear, the *Gallant* could cope. They'd once sat for three months in the aftermath of the Cygnus civil war, when the warring rebels had nuked their own seas rather than give up their plesiosaur farms.

Not pleasant, but survivable.

Suddenly this mission had become interesting. Captain Cho raised a curious eyebrow.

'Send a message to Alpha Marina,' he said. 'Tell them we're going in.'

Every five years, for three months, Selonart was the centre of the universe.

Everyone who could be here would be. Already, the number of vessels moored at Alpha Marina outnumbered its entire traffic in the intervening time since the last great race. Not to mention the hundreds of orbital shuttles lashed down on to the artificial landing islands, a present from Sector Administration (and oh, didn't they let

Marius know it).

Governor Marius fussed with his cloak of office (damn pins) and looked down from his basalt palace to the bursting town below.

With land mass on Selonart almost non-existent, space was at a premium and the Governor noted with wry amusement the reports of brawling and bad temper that were already stalking his colony. He could imagine these pampered crews, used to absolute authority, rubbing shoulders and trading blows with the journalists, the media types, the bookies, the corporate raiders, the entrepreneurs, the hot-dog sellers and all the other junk that came with the biggest sporting event in the galaxy. And not just any sporting event, no. The Fourteenth Selonart Trans-Global Regatta.

Chapter One

19

The Governor looked down through the spacious angular windows of his palace, down at the mass of pennants and hotels and bars and restaurants and pools below. It was a beautiful red summer evening and these visitors, some of the richest people in the empire, were making the most of it. They bustled through the crowded streets searching out places to eat, places to drink; it all smelt of money. And threading their big clumsy way through, trying to make a few credits hawking their dreck: the natives.

Flecks in the sky were winking. Not stars, rather the satellites and orbital hotels for those too poor or too late to buy their way into the limited space on the planet. Those who would spend their days in smoky rooms, watching the action on the televisions, worrying about their money. These spinning metal luxuries flashed in the dying day, lighting up the sky like distant fireworks.

Selonart had never known such attention.

Down on the harbour, the small launches and pilot boats were moored, clustered and penned, dwarfed by the visiting vessels. This was the usual traffic on Selonart, drab ferries, lashed to the wooden jetties. They were like tourist attractions now, like antique show-boats, surrounded as they were by brightly dressed revellers drinking in the beautiful evening. As Marius watched, a whole line of drunken white suited partygoers, bottles in hand, plunged into the reddening water, whooping as they went.

He saved the best until last. The racing yachts themselves. Moored out to floating platforms twelve kilometres out from Alpha. He looked and couldn't prevent a grin, although he hated to reveal his emotions to anyone. This was going to be the biggest race ever.

Those craft, those gigantic floating villages, were incredible. Beyond belief.

No wonder the empire went mad for the race. No expense spared, an old cliché, but when put to work quite breathtaking.

The racing yachts shone in the dying sun. They beamed; they almost preened. Lights flickered over their creamy brand-new hulls, final checks before the launch tomorrow. Hundreds of technical crew rushing like ants up and down and round their light, streamlined decks. The yachts looked powerful, and indeed they were. Tailor-made to augment the unique properties of the Selonart oceans.

Sleek, gigantic missiles: catamarans, single hulls, multi-decked craft which he would never be able to name.

Nowhere else would you see this, Marius thought to himself. Nowhere else in the universe.

Chapter One

20

'Governor?' came a voice. Marius took a deep breath. He fastened the neck-pin on his cloak of office. He had work to do.

Still looking at the sun bleeding into the endless ocean, Marius grunted at the official who had spoken. 'What is it, Peck?'

Peck was a lackey, a toadying fool, but a useful one. He liked his work and seemed to have a strange attachment to his System Admin's grey uniform.

He was never seen out of it. Some people could be too dedicated.

'It's the *Gallant*, sir. We've still heard nothing.'

Marius turned, feeling the anger rising that Peck always brought out in him. Why did the man always insist on making everyone else feel lazy?

'Well, Captain Cho did say it was possible we would lose contact.

When he went into this cloud or whatever it was.'

'I'm rather worried, sir. It's been nearly a full day. . . '

'Peck! I am about to host the opening ceremony for the biggest event in the galaxy. The richest, most important corporations and colonies in the known universe are waiting for me. One could build a planet with the money they've spent on this race. Now, do you really think I've got time to worry about broken contact with the most experienced submarine crew in the empire, halfway round Selonart, who have given us due warning that this very thing might occur?'

He stared at Peck, daring the man to contradict. Marius knew he wouldn't.

Peck loathed confrontation. Didn't have the stomach for it. He himself thrived on it. Was a natural arguer. It was better to speak one's mind. People respected that kind of honesty.

'Hmm?' he probed.

'Honestly, Mr Peck. You're like an old woman. Or a Blockhead.' Marius was pleased with this. A rich seam of wit was opening up. 'Are you a Blockhead, Mr Peck? Perhaps you're not from Earth at all. Is there some Selonart blood running around in there?'

Peck mumbled.

'Sorry, didn't quite catch that.'

'No sir.'

Peck looked so mournful that he decided to take pity. Marius swirled his robe around for dramatic effect. 'We are about to broadcast to the galaxy. Do try to enjoy yourself. How's my hair?'

Peck coughed drily. 'It's fine, sir.'

'Good lad. Let's go. Destiny awaits!'

Chapter One

The arena was, appropriately enough, modelled on a coliseum. Governor Marius could barely see the swarm of people crushed inside, such was the glare from the television lights shining unblinkingly on

to his platform. It was the noise and the smell that gave them away. There were thousands of them. Almost everybody on the planet. A Selonart breeze had started up, catching the flags and pennants celebrating the race.

Marius raised his hands for quiet to let the applause die down and waited for the autocue to blink on.

And the journalists. Heavens, it seemed there were thousands of them, with their micro-cameras and lights, all hanging on his every word, practically salivating. The racing crews, marked out like escaping prisoners in the spotlights, decked out in their colours: the sleek whites of the Earth Imperial entry, the dark grey of the Mikron Conglomerates – whose racers looked more like IT systems administrators than romantic racers, the green of the Western Hub consortium, even the red tunics of the Bronstein Union of Socialist Systems (such a dour and dull lot. They never won).

And the others, the no-hopers. The comedy element. Only a few of those, the entrance fee for the race could feed a colony for a year, but there were still one or two eccentric individuals who thought the race was all about the adventure. When really, of course, it was all about money.

A buzz in his earpiece. Show time.

Governor Marius of Selonart began, his voice ringing around the coliseum, symbolising the further spaceward echoes as he was broadcast round the galaxy.

‘Ladies and gentlemen.

Citizens of our glorious empire!’

He looked

around, trying to see past the lights. He opened his eyes wider, allowing the light dusting of glittered cosmetic to bring his face out in flattering relief.

‘Citizens of the Empire. Thank you all for travelling to our planet. To the wonderful, magical, magnificent planet of Selonart! Where dreams not only can come true – by decree, they must!’ (The official marketing catchphrase

– to be inserted into public speeches until it breaches subliminal.)

Applause. Loud. Louder than he would have thought possible.

‘Seventy years ago the chance discovery by a handful of brave pioneers began a process that has grown and grown until. . . well, my, how we have grown!’

Cheering, cheering and more cheering. Governor Marius raised a finger to his lips for order. So many people. He was perspiring under his robe. He felt Chapter One

22

like a magician.

‘Tonight we celebrate that spirit of dream and adventure. These brave crews will race each other at speeds those early pioneers could only have dreamed of. One factor remains the same. And that factor is this: we will go further and faster than humanity has ever dared go before. We are in uncharted territory. The risks are great, the rewards greater.’

He paused. They were quiet now. Sheep. He could do anything he wanted.

He was surprised to feel such contempt for them. This was too easy. He turned to the crews, nervous as they were, grinning like uniformed idiots under such intense scrutiny.

‘Gladiators of the waves. The eyes of the empire are upon you, Tomorrow at dawn, you will commence a journey into the unknown. Let the Galaxy tremble for: The Fourteenth Selonart Trans-Global Regatta!’

And on this, the racing yachts sounded their godlike sirens and no one could hear anything, except perhaps just the faint whisper of an empire cheering.

When it was all done, a triumph of course, Governor Marius ordered champagne for the owners and financiers and held a private party in the only place on Selonart that could possibly remain exclusive: his own palace. There would be no journalists here.

The crews were mere showbiz. The people here at his party were the most powerful in the empire. The Corporate Elite.

They were subdued, sombre, physically unable to allow uncontrolled

emotion to overwhelm their reasoning skills. Fit, tanned, scientifically augmented for long life spans and the wielding of illimitable power. It was even rumoured that one of the MikronCorps execs was a distant relative of the Emperor himself.

Governor Marius would have killed his mother to be like them.

‘Strictly humans only, of course,’ Marius was saying to one of the first-timers, an incredibly boring short, pig-resembling financial director who probably owned several star systems and was quite intoxicated by the intensity of the race. Some of his bitterest rivals would be in the room too, so he was almost shaking with the experience. ‘It wouldn’t be fair to let other species in. Start doing that and heaven knows where it would end. Level playing field, that’s what’s needed.’

‘What about the practice of using native Selonarts?’ the financial director Chapter One

23

(or whoever he was) asked, probingly. His manner was so direct, so down-to-earth that for an instant Governor Marius felt foolish in his robes and glitter.

‘Well,’ he replied smoothly. ‘Strictly speaking they are human. The second generation of a few colonists that settled here seventy odd years ago. I mean, they look funny but they are in fact registered humans and therefore citizens.

Much as a Jovian or a Proximan is a citizen.’

‘In other words, these “mystical” powers of sensing the ocean currents are real, so you’ve bent the rules to accommodate them.’

Governor Marius bowed politely. ‘Alas, I do not make the rules, I merely enforce them. If you’ll excuse me. . . ’

‘Are there any women here? I’d like to meet some women. . . ’

‘Please, indulge yourself,’ and at last Marius was away.

He took a few moments to compose himself. He’d had too much champagne. Looking out of the palace windows, down at the same view he had seen earlier, he started to feel slightly ill. He saw his reflection in the plasti-glass, a painted clown in a curly orange wig. Again, for some reason he felt foolish, like he was the only man at the

party in fancy dress.

Then, someone was standing behind him. Marius jumped. It was as if the man had come from nowhere. A large, very still man. His skull gleamed bronze beneath very close cropped hair; the cut an icy contrast with the fashionable curly locks of the Execs. He was undoubtedly very, very strong.

Muscles were barely hidden beneath the ochre robes. His gaze was stern and unblinking.

'Governor,' he said in silk tones that barely concealed the steel beneath them. He held out a hand. 'I missed your introduction in person but from the television you were very impressive. You must be proud of yourself.'

Marius felt his hand clamped by the large man's fist. His own was clammy and cold. Marius smiled warmly. This was just the kind of reassurance he needed.

'I don't believe we've met.'

The man smiled warmly. 'Oh there's time. There's plenty of that.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Count Toriman de Vries. House of De Vries. You won't have heard of me.'

Only now did he release his grip.

'De Vries?'

Chapter One

24

'A competitor. A racer. My yacht is smaller, less flamboyant than these others. But I have a few little surprises on board. . . '

Marius nodded. The man had entered the competition out of pride. Because he could. 'Racing for the thrill of the race. A noble sentiment. And honest.'

De Vries smiled. The man had amazing charm, and Marius knew about charm. 'Oh no, Governor. I intend to win. I really do.'

The stare was so friendly but so fixed that Marius didn't know how to read it. He turned away, unable to sustain eye contact. He looked out over the darkened Marina once more, and the ships in the distance, lights still blinking as their crews worked on final preparations for the morning start.

'It's going to be one hell of a race,' he said, perhaps realising this truly for the first time.

'It is indeed, Governor,' said De Vries softly. 'It is indeed.'

Chapter Two

So what it was then, was junk mail.

Sure, junk mail in the shape of a model boat that when breathed on turned itself inside out and fired up an incredible holographic light show detailing in breathtaking proportions the amazing trans-global Selonart racing regatta.

But isn't breathtaking what junk mail's supposed to do?

One would have thought, wouldn't one, that in the future junk mail would have been understood as a phenomenon essentially bad for humanity, and much time and effort expended in obliterating said phenomenon from existence for all time. However, such is the nature of our unpredictable and chaotic universe (whichever one we're in), that this is not the case. Junk mail is clearly a hardy beast and will not die quickly. They say that cock-roaches are likely to be the most successful survivors of an apocalypse but I'm sure junk mail is up there.

Mind you, none of this fantastically intelligent insight appeared to have entered the Doctor's mind. Oh no. He fell for it, hook, line and proverbial sinker.

'Selonart!' he yelled as he banged away at the TARDIS console, firing in co-ordinates. 'The red sun melting into the azure waves. The giant yachts cutting through the oceans. The sea, the spray. Oh, you haven't lived, Anji, not until you have witnessed the Selonart Trans-Global Regatta.'

Inevitably, this ridiculous display of childish enthusiasm only served to ridiculously enthuse the actual child within the TARDIS. Yes, I am referring to Mr Fitz Kreiner.

‘Oh man,’ he said, once he could tear his eyes away from the gaudy display on the console. ‘We have got to do that. We have got to do that race. Do you think they’ll let me drive a boat?’ Fitz, as you know, is a grown man, which made this unseemly display even more disturbing.

‘Drive a boat?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Fitz, please.’

‘Excuse me. . . ’ I said.

25

Chapter Two

26

‘Those yachts!’ continued Fitz, in the same starry-eyed vein. ‘The size of them. How can they move so quickly?’

‘Excuse me. . . ’ I said a little louder.

‘It’s the water, you see,’ the Doctor explained. In his way, i.e. too fast for anyone to understand. ‘The oceans of Selonart possess strange properties.

Once the molecules of this liquid are disturbed, they release a type of null energy, the overall effect of which is to significantly reduce the forces of drag and inertia. In other words, the water makes the yachts go faster.’

Fitz tried to make sense of this; not a pleasant sight. ‘That doesn’t sound right. Is it true?’

The Doctor smiled and boggled his eyes. ‘I don’t know! Nobody knows. It just works. Exciting, isn’t it?’ He turned away back to the console.

‘Excuse me!’ I bellowed.

At last, the pair of them paid some attention. ‘Thank you,’ I said, trying to remain even-tempered. I gave them my best stern look. ‘Now then, before we all turn our brains off and become full-on hooray henries, can we just remember that this is, as agreed earlier, a trap. This junk-mail boat-thing got into the TARDIS without our knowledge. Doesn’t that worry anyone here?’

I stared at them and suppressed a giggle. They were both staring at

the floor like guilty school boys. Hangdog faces and hands behind their backs.

All I could hear was the humming of the TARDIS console. I was half waiting for one of them to say, ‘Don’t know, Miss.’

I continued, ‘For a start: Doctor, how come you know so much about this Selonart race?’

The Doctor scuffed his shoes, jabbing the toes into the floor, clearly wishing I wasn’t asking these annoying questions. ‘Well,’ he said, hesitantly. ‘I helped crew one of the early races. I think I did, anyway.’

‘You think?’

He shrugged, defensively. ‘My memory isn’t what it was. At least, I think it isn’t. Can’t remember exactly what in fact it was.’

I held up a warning finger. ‘Stop there. . . ’ This was complicated enough.

‘Secondly, what about Sabbath? We have to figure on him leaving this in the TARDIS knowing we’d follow him. He’ll be there somewhere, waiting for us.’

‘Anji. . . ’ he started.

‘And finally,’ I kept going, ‘how do we know where the hell we are? This isn’t my universe, nor yours, nor Fitz’s. How do we know what’s changed Chapter Two

27

and what hasn’t? I’m worried, Doctor. I don’t want to spoil your fun but I’m worried.’

The Doctor took a deep breath and smiled. One of his warm smiles. It was impossible to be angry with him. Impossible to be anything when he smiled like that.

‘Of course you’re right, Anji. We’re in uncharted waters. I don’t know the answers. But I do know the only way to solve this is to keep going. We’ve got no choice.’

He put his hand on my shoulder. For some reason, his words brought tears into my eyes. He made me think of home, of my job, of the London that must still be out there somewhere, where people lived

normal lives. A world of bad weather and toast and Saturday tea times in front of the telly. Gone.

Gone for me. Just slipped round a corner and sneaked away. God, I hoped we could find it again.

'Right,' said the Doctor. 'I suppose we'd better get started. Spot of sailing.'

Or spectating the sailing. Blow away the cobwebs.'

Fitz was halfway to the inner door. 'I'll get changed then,' he said. As usual, looking good was going to be half the battle for Fitz.

The Doctor nodded furiously. 'Oh yes. Jolly boating weather and all that.'

Sou'westers and wellies all round!'

I was forced to cough for attention. I had to. Even Fitz was looking at me as if the Doctor had gone mad. 'Err, Doctor,' I said, 'sou'westers and wellies?'

I know we're in a parallel universe and everything but do you really think it'll be composed entirely of nobs?'

I found myself laughing. I couldn't help it.

It was a rocky landing. Literally, as the TARDIS was rocking all over the place as soon as the Doctor interfaced with the conditions into which we had materialised. We were travelling very fast.

The yacht was not really what I would have called a yacht. It was more like a huge, arrow-shaped building. It was massive!

As we climbed out of the TARDIS, trying to hold ourselves steady, I could see already that we were moving at one hell of a rate.

We were on the deck of a yacht, a yacht that was sweeping across a black sea in the middle of the night. There was money in this yacht, that was obvious from the word go. Ornate lights (and I would swear they were *digital* lights; don't ask) had been placed in the walls and deck and you could almost Chapter Two

of the yacht were built simply to smash speed records. In as luxurious surroundings as possible.

Fitz whistled. ‘Wow. Doctor?’

The Doctor was, of course, nosing around inspecting this and that. Sometimes he could see the trees and not the wood. It wasn’t the details that mattered; it was the *sheerness* of it all. ‘Mmm?’ he replied, absently.

‘I didn’t think we’d actually appear on a yacht. I mean, isn’t that going to be a little tricky? I thought we’d land on, well, land.’

The Doctor looked up and I could see that the magic of the yacht had affected him too. He was exhilarated. ‘On Selonart there isn’t any land. A few outcrops of basalt as I recall, most odd; really nothing but posts sticking out of the sea. I suppose the TARDIS simply homed in on the most convenient and available space there was. The staging posts will be full to bursting with tourists and the like.’ He turned away, brandishing a magnifying glass. ‘Look at this, it’s fascinating, look how the wood of the deck is grown to actually grip the feet. . .’

At that point, *I* turned away.

I could hear the swish-swish of the waves as the bow bit through the ocean.

The Doctor had been right about the water, there was something funny about how this boat was travelling. Nothing like anything I’d felt before. It was like the yacht was on a trampoline or springs or something. Each jolt was absurdly exaggerated, like sailing on air.

The most amazing thing was that I felt so *good*. Being on this yacht, knif-ing through the water, the fresh breeze across my face, the lightness of it, I couldn’t help myself. I ran to the railing across from where we’d materialised and, gripping its expensive rubber-clad grips, I stared down at the black water churning below. Down there, the occasional white flash of foam clapped regular and rhythmic against the hull. And I laughed.

I felt clean.

‘Something’s wrong,’ said the Doctor. Inevitably.

‘Oh come on, Doctor,’ replied Fitz, who joined me at the railing. Small, fresh droplets of water covered his face and leather coat. His

eyes gleamed with excitement. I didn't blame him, I felt it too. The droplets covered my face as well.

Despite the night it was warm on this yacht, and I felt constricted by my heavy jumper and coat. I felt so alive here that I could feel my body craving Chapter Two

29

total freedom. I could have thrown off everything and run to the bow with arms outstretched.

All right, calm down. I was excited. Any references to Kate Winslet will be punishable by death. Just trying to convey how it felt that first few moments on Selonart. In the end, all I took off was my coat.

'I'm telling you,' said the Doctor, again, 'something's wrong. Listen.'

I was going to remonstrate but. . . then again he is the Doctor. I listened.

And there was something. A mechanical whine amongst all this freshness and speed. A harsh sound. Something that was straining itself.

'The engines,' said Fitz. 'They're really pumping.'

'It's a race,' I said, stating the obvious. 'That's what engines do. Presumably, the crew want to win. Therefore, the engines go fast.'

'Well, where are the crew?' asked Fitz.

'Asleep, brain box.' I wasn't going to allow anything to dispel this mood.

'I don't think so,' said the Doctor. 'These yachts are like babies; they need constant attention. There should be someone on duty. Someone should have noticed.'

I knew what was coming. I could almost mouth his words.

'I'll just pop in and take a look.'

He looked around quickly, turned and then was off bounding down the deckway looking for doors. We were going to have to do that 'run after him and ask questions' thing. I looked at Fitz, who looked at me. We nodded and started after him.

Yes, I admit it. I knew something had gone wrong on the yacht. After all, we were after Sabbath and after my brief but pertinent run-in with him in Siberia it wasn't likely that this was going to be a pleasure cruise, was it?

I don't know. It felt like just standing on that deck watching the black sea churning by relaxed me. Much more than I had been for ages. I suppose I should have known then that that was the calm-before-the-storm moment.

It was going to get worse from here on in.

Actually, it was worse even than that. Much worse.

We found the first body in the first room. The bridge.

I heard the *squik! squik!* of the windscreen wipers on the windows; that's the first thing I remember. The Doctor trotted up a small flight of steps and into what looked the control cabin of a starship. It made the TARDIS look Chapter Two

30

needy. Discreet and obviously very powerful computer equipment blipped away, oblivious to the soft mess covering it.

I thought first of all he was piloting the yacht (I figured that that would be the word they used to drive this vessel) and was concentrating so hard he hadn't heard us. Then I smelled him.

What was left of him was tied around the steering wheel thing they use to drive boats. His hand was clamped to a large red button. It didn't take genius to figure that this would be the SOS alarm. The tattered remains of a dark-grey sailing jumpsuit-type thing hung off him. Whatever had got to him hadn't left much.

'Poor fellow,' said the Doctor, glancing at the body.

My own reaction was slightly more emotional, I am afraid to say. I could feel the shakes coming on; fear getting hold of me and turning me cold. 'It's horrible!' I said. 'What. . . what could have done that? Who would tie him to the wheel?' I put my hand over my mouth in an attempt to stave off the inevitable. In the near silent room, something was ticking. And, of course, *squik! squik!*

The Doctor looked grim. In the green light from the computers he

seemed to me like a ghost. ‘Perhaps he tied himself. . .’

Fitz was trying not to look at the corpse. He stepped over it and checked out the darkened bridge. ‘It all seems to be running OK.’ He stopped himself.

‘Well, it’s all on and the lights are green.’

‘Not everything,’ said the Doctor. ‘Judging by the decomposition this happened some time ago. If he had been pressing the SOS and it worked, they should have been rescued by now.’

He crossed to an impressive bank of technology. ‘Engine diagnostics,’ he stated flatly. ‘Someone’s put this boat into overdrive. And made sure it couldn’t be powered down. Not from here, anyway. Main coupling link to the engine room’s been severed.’

I couldn’t take my eyes off the dead man at the wheel. ‘Him? Maybe he thought he could outrun whatever it was that got him.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think it was done after he died.’

‘Who?’ asked Fitz. ‘Competitors? Pretty extreme way to make sure you win.’

I suddenly felt even colder. ‘Doctor,’ I whispered, ‘what if whatever did this is still here?’

If I’d wanted silence I certainly got it. We all looked at each other, aware Chapter Two

31

that we were wandering blindly round this huge boat assuming that whatever happened happened a long time ago.

‘I don’t think we should jump to conclusions,’ said the Doctor. ‘We don’t know what killed him. It could even be some kind of plague. Look at the state of his skin. He could have caught it, realised the SOS wasn’t working and strapped himself down in a last desperate dash for help.’

‘Except, as you said: he didn’t set the engines to overdrive.’ I couldn’t help it. I was convinced he’d been murdered by something, some living thing. I couldn’t see the man’s face, that was staring sightlessly out through the dark windows, but it was clear from the reflection in

the bridge window that his muscles had clenched his face tight. In his last few moments he had been absolutely terrified.

Anji,' said the Doctor, trying to soothe me. 'Perhaps he isn't the last man.'

Perhaps another crew member set the engines for him.'

I nodded, far too vigorously, wanting to be convinced. I was shaking.

'Look,' said the Doctor, 'we need to search the rest of the boat. There might still be someone alive, someone who needs help. And we need to get those engines calmed down. Anji, if you want to go back to the TARDIS. . . '

'No!' I snapped, harder than I meant. 'No, Doctor. You get to the engine room. Fitz and I will look around.' I looked at Fitz. 'Yeah?'

Fitz nodded, deflated by this scene on the bridge. 'Yeah. We'll go and search.'

The Doctor produced a fob watch from somewhere inside his dimensionally transcendental velvet jacket. 'Half an hour and I'll meet you back at the TARDIS. Don't be late and for heaven's sake don't let yourselves get split up.'

Anji, wait outside. Fitz, help me cut this poor fellow free.'

We stood for a moment and looked at each other again, each considering possibilities. Maybe the Doctor thought I would have some kind of sexist argument about his last comment. No.

I was out of that reeking bridge as fast as I could move. I didn't even make it to the side of the boat. I heaved my guts out all over that nice, posh deck.

We found the rest of them, not as many as one would have thought for a vessel this size, but enough. They were all dead. Stacked in piles, like someone had been building a sculpture. And not intact either.

I didn't really know what to do. I mean, I've travelled with the Doctor and death is not exactly new to me but to say that I've got used to it is far Chapter Two

names?

Count the corpses? I trust we will be forgiven for not thinking straight.

Those few hours would stay with me. Fitz and I picking our way through the labyrinthine yacht, through the cabins and the galleys and everywhere else. It wasn't much like a boat on Earth. Despite its racing credentials, there was no stinting on the luxury and the crew must have lived pretty comfortably. When they were alive.

Always, it was the design that gave it away; the shapes. Everything was streamlined, from bunks to walls. All that effort and money. And now none of it mattered.

The lights were dimmed and apart from the permanent hum of the engines, which grew louder the lower we descended, the energy levels were minimal. Which meant we couldn't get the lights on. How convenient. But not for us.

The air was thick with the smell of decomposition. I was glad of the torches the Doctor had insisted we bring although all they seemed to do was make shadows around the beam darker and more threatening.

The movement of the yacht through the water and the bumping and shifting gave the place the illusion of movement. We would walk into a cabin to see something roll in the dark, or slide across a table. My heart gave a little jump and my throat dried. Then we would hear a clang of plastic thudding against plastic and realise a locker door was swinging and banging into its frame. It was only later that we would see what was tucked into a corner or slumped over in the shadows, as if cut down in the act of running. I counted about twenty in all, all in the same state.

This boat was dead. Nothing lived on it except us.

And then I heard the noises.

We were in some kind of lounge. At one end of the room, behind a bar, plastic bottles had been moulded into the walls. A futuristic kind of jukebox sat in a corner, its facade cracked under the impact of a metal chair. Fitz was pulling a blanket over one more rank, grinning body perched over a table.

I wondered what kind of thing had killed her that had caused her to gouge great holes in the table. Her fingernails were torn and crusted with dried blood.

I heard something move in the corridor.

I snapped up and knew that I'd emitted a hot, dry scream. Fitz jumped.

'What? What is it?'

Chapter Two

33

Putting a finger to my lips to quiet him, I crouched and sneaked to the swinging door. I heard Fitz follow. He really could be quiet when he wanted to be. I was glad he was there. I was refusing to give in to the cliché female that was threatening to allow me to run and cower in my own sweat in a corner, hoping whatever it was would miss me. Always better to confront the bad thing head on. Well, nearly always.

'Doctor?' I whispered.

Nothing. Not for the first time I wondered why the Doctor never issued us with walkie-talkies when we went off and did things. Save a lot of has-sle. Even a pay-as-you-go would have been better than nothing. Suppose it would have been a bit difficult coming back every two months for your top-up card. . .

Well, these are the kind of panicked thoughts that go through a girl's mind when she's on a strange alien ship full of bodies and hears a strange noise.

It's either that or run away screaming.

Funny how even though we'd just walked through this deck, in the dark I realised I didn't remember any of it. Funny like you could die laughing.

There were ducts here, a miniature framework around the main structure.

I don't like ducts. Things hide in them. I flicked off my torch and peeked out into the gloom.

'Did you hear that?' I asked Fitz. He shook his head but didn't shake his head in that 'Anji's off again' way. I wish he had.

The corridor was empty. I felt the roll of the yacht and everything shifted just ever so slightly. Things, unseen things, slid around

throughout the boat.

I took a deep breath. It was my imagination. Thank heaven for that.

Creak.

A footstep, perhaps, somewhere just out of sight. I saw Fitz flinch and knew he'd heard it this time.

'Doctor?' Well, there was no harm in trying. Not for the first time I started thinking of ghost ships and what one was supposed to do when one was trapped on one. Die seemed to be the usual Hollywood answer. Unfortunate.

'Stay back,' said Fitz, bravely. 'I'll take a look.'

'Get real,' I hissed back. That kind of comment managed to control my fear and I edged out into the corridor. I looked back just to check Fitz was there and then it all becomes a bit of blur.

I remember Fitz's torch and him shouting something. I remember his eyes widening in alarm and his warning shout.

Chapter Two

34

Fitz stood up just as something crashed into the corridor. What he did then was excellent. As far as I recall, he made to leap out after me, launched himself forward and smashed his head into the door frame. Poleaxed, down he went. I remember thinking, 'oh nice one, Fitz,' then something big and heavy then proceeded to do the same to me.

The pain was incredible. My mouth hit the carpet. It tasted of salt water.

My head was split open and someone had let dogs loose inside. If I hadn't lost my lunch earlier, I would have lost it then. A great black hole burst inside my skull. I consoled myself with the thought that it was undoubtedly fatal.

Anything except this pain. Bravely, I reconciled myself to death.

I heard shouting and then hands pulling me up. 'He hit you!' someone was shouting. 'He hit you!'

I staggered into the wall as Fitz held on to me. His forehead spilled

dark liquid. The corridor spun in front of my eyes. I caught a glimpse of legs running up the stairs in the distance. ‘Next deck!’ Fitz yelled and let go to give chase.

I fell over again (you know, this never happens in films, it really doesn’t), tried to blank out the pummelling in my brain and clutched my way after him. ‘Fitz! Fitz!’ Well, that’s what I tried to say, anyway.

‘Fetch the Doctor!’ he yelled from up above and on high.

No way, I thought. I want payback. No one cracks me on the head when I’m laughing at the clumsy ineptitude of my friends. I hauled myself up the steps.

There was a crash, a heavy one, and I realised Fitz had performed one of his famous rugby tackles. I had to get in there before the big lunk got himself killed.

‘Fitz! Are you OK?’ I bellowed. I must have been getting better because I understood myself that time. I was going to need a ton of aspirin though and that is, unfortunately, one commodity the Doctor never carries in the TARDIS. Perhaps he likes headaches.

I leaped (OK, fair enough: fell) through the door through which I could hear sounds of struggling. A galley, thankfully devoid of corpses.

Fitz was fighting with a man. A very big man, much bigger than him.

And a man struggling like a demon. There was something strange about his head. . .

Oddly, Fitz was winning. He’d never won a fight in his life. His coat was torn and his hair all over the place but, you know, I thought he looked rather Chapter Two

35

heroic in an adolescent schoolgirl fantasy kind of way. I was tempted to stand and watch.

‘Anji! Help me here!’ he yelled desperately, and I realised it wasn’t a game.

The man looked at me, caught in Fitz’s armlock, and I knew instantly he hadn’t done it. He wasn’t any murderer.

His eyes were terrified, terrified almost to madness. He was shaking with fear, just cringing like a cornered dog. Sad too. Someone who had gone beyond anything they could sanely deal with.

I grabbed Fitz's arm. 'Leave him!' I yelled. 'Leave him.'

It took a minute or two but at last I got them loose. The man fell back into some ringing metal cooking pots and lost his footing. He dropped backwards to the floor, staring at us. His teeth chattered and he pulled his arms over his head. He was wearing some kind of woollen jumper. I don't know why but it struck me that this was the first cheap-looking item I had seen on this yacht.

'It's OK,' I tried to say. 'We've come to help you. Help...'

His feet slid on the tiled floor as he scrabbled to try to get up. Fitz was trying to get his breath back. His nice leather coat was ripped all up his right sleeve. He wouldn't like that in the morning. 'What the hell -' he started but I hissed at him to keep shtum.

The man finally controlled his panic but his mouth moved silently, giving away his fear. I didn't like to think what could have frightened him so much.

He looked like he hadn't eaten for weeks.

'I'm Anji,' I said, keeping my voice calm as my nerves would allow. I shone the torch into my face and tried to look like Florence Nightingale. 'Anji. We're here to help.'

At that point my head really started to throb. The short bit of blinding agony was over. The long-term more obese kind of pain had moved in. And already it was unpacking its toothbrush and pyjamas for a really long stay.

He'd really lumped me, whoever he was.

At least he seemed more settled. He was looking around at us suspiciously, as if calculating his chances, but at least he wasn't running. Or hitting people on the head.

'What's your name?' I asked. 'Are you injured?'

'My coat,' said Fitz, hurt. 'It's ruined.'

'Not you!'

I looked back at the man and for a moment I thought he was deformed, or maybe not even a man at all. I tried to keep the curiosity out of my Chapter Two

36

expression. I wasn't the kind of person who gawped, surely.

His head was almost rectangular, and oversized. Lumpen, like he had hydrocephalus or whatever it is. His lower lip protruded like a tongue. In fact, I thought it was his tongue, glistening and wet in the near dark. His hair was rough, like straw and a matted grey. He could have been any age but something in him seemed young. Childishly young. His eyes were clear, deep pools of darkness. I felt sorry for him but I don't know why. It was as if he were the wrong shape. Just the wrong shape for this life.

'Blum,' he said. The word, whatever it meant, was soft and somehow very beautiful, as if he had used someone else's voice. The accent was clipped; it reminded me of South African.

'Blum?' I asked.

'Don't get too close,' said Fitz. 'I don't trust him.'

'Blum.'

And that was how we met Bloom.

To be honest, it wasn't much of an introduction. The first thing Bloom did was insist, practically beg us to get out of the corridors and into the ducts.

Turns out that's how he had been living for a week.

We did what he asked and not just to humour him. I really think he would have had a nervous breakdown or thrown himself overboard if we hadn't.

He still didn't trust Fitz, after all the guy had been beating him up five minutes beforehand, but despite smacking me on the head with a saucepan (as far as I can make out) he did seem to understand that I had no intentions of revenge.

We climbed up on to the galley units and through into this tiny crawlspace high up on the wall. And before you ask, apparently they

were used on the yacht as an emergency measure, some sort of flotation-stroke-venting system in case things went pearshaped. Got that? Unfortunately, Bloom had been using them to cope with a very different kind of emergency.

'There's something on the ship,' he muttered, pulling the grill back in behind him. 'It kills.'

I tried to shove my way along but all I was getting was Fitz's boots in my face. It was now pitch black as Bloom refused to allow us any light source. That strange, hypnotic voice wafted along past my own boots. It did something to help cope with the fear.

Chapter Two

37

'We have to get away. It came for them and now it will come for us.' He sounded almost resigned. 'They tried to fight it. . . once they knew what was happening.' I could almost sense Fitz's disbelief through his boots. As for myself, I couldn't have agreed more with Bloom. Let's get the hell out of here.

'Bloom,' I whispered. 'I have to know. When did it all start? Those bodies, it looks like they've been here months.'

Silence from behind.

'How did you stay alive so long without it finding you?'

'Anji, I think we need to. . .' started Fitz.

'Bloom. How long?'

Bloom had stopped moving. It was as if he was remembering, clearly remembering everything that had happened for the first time. I wanted to prompt him, to know, but I figured he had to volunteer any information if we were to get him on our side.

'I. . . I. . . wanted to help them. They didn't like Bloom,' he rambled.

'Didn't want him around.'

'Bloom, tell me. Please. How long have you been out here? A week? A month?'

'Yesterday,' he replied softly. 'Started yesterday. And it's still here.'

Something dark.'

Fitz stopped and I rammed into his boots. We had just had the same thought.

'Doctor!' he whispered, agonised.

Chapter Three

There was no doubt, whoever had fixed these engines had fixed them permanently. The yacht was going to destroy itself and there was nothing he could do about it.

The Doctor made a few half-hearted attempts to outmanoeuvre the complex restructuring the saboteur had made to the control units but he knew it would be to no avail. He shone the torch over the sealed magnetic systems box welded to the engine relays. The noise in here was incredible; the power stacks were primed well over maximum. Heat stole the oxygen from the depths of the ship.

The box would be booby-trapped. If he had more time, maybe... but no, it was too late. He wasn't going to risk Anji and Fitz in a meaningless attempt to repair the damage. He looked down at the crow bar in his hand.

Too clumsy; too clumsy and too late. How long did they have? An hour?

Perhaps less.

He tried to backtrack the saboteur's intentions. Kill the crew; presumably with some weapon hidden aboard at the start of the race. The same weapon, or assassin, also disabling the geosat com-links as well as wiping the yacht from the face of the planetary sensors. Come alongside in another vessel, tear the engine relays apart, reinstall and seal. Seal so well that no one could interfere, not even him.

Set the yacht on a pre-arranged course and blow it up in the middle of the ocean.

That was how. What about why?

He sat back away from the alien box and removed his magnifying spectacles. The power units were like huge metal filing cabinets, stuffed with enough compressed fusion elements to power a small country. The heat, although nothing like the solar temperatures inside,

was demoralising. The engines screamed, as if in pain.

Nothing to be done. Nothing to be done. Time to leave. He hoped Anji and Fitz were staying out of trouble. Not that there should be any trouble; 38

Chapter Three

39

unless the saboteurs could survive nuclear blasts it was unlikely they would still be on board. He tucked the crow bar under his arm and pushed shut the spectacle arms with a satisfactory click of finality.

As the Doctor turned away, the cloaked figure dropped silently down from the ceiling like a man-sized bat. He realised it had been crawling over his head towards him.

Instinctively the Doctor dropped and rolled towards the engines.

He

smelled wood-rot and a sweet charnel sickness as a bony hand swooped through the thick air just past him. Something sticky like honey dripped from the limb and sizzled in the heat of the high-density floor.

The figure clattered on to that floor like a mass of broken sticks. It was a man, or may perhaps have been one once. It hissed at him. The Doctor saw a bare, wispy skull and dead, dead eyes. There would be no negotiation here, no deals.

So they had left something behind. Well, thought the Doctor, one can always be wrong.

He jumped to his feet and ran.

He felt its speed behind him. He realised he wasn't going to be fast enough to reach the door. Its presence was all over him, like a sour cloud.

The Doctor spun and hurled the metal bar he'd forgotten he was holding into its bony mass. It halted the creature's advance, for a second. Enough for him to reach the steps leading to the upper decks. Behind him, he heard mad clicking teeth.

It's enjoying this, thought the Doctor. It's having a right old laugh. He

sprinted up the stairs trying to work out how on earth he was going to use that to his advantage.

He heard it scuttle up the steps after him.

In front of him was a long dark corridor leading to another set of steps.

Corridors, always corridors, he thought, not pausing for breath. The creature bounced off the walls behind him still clicking and clacking. It was so quick.

He saw the steps, saw how far they were and realised that again he wasn't going to make it. And there was nothing to be used as a weapon. This time he was going to be caught. He felt something reach for him and he just dived headlong. Something sharp, and very cold, raked across his back. He saw the black floor loom and then he hit it. That was it then. He was already dead.

'Doctor!' came a cry. Fitz. And then a ball of flame, bright cherry-coloured Chapter Three

40

flame, exploded over him. He heard the creature squeal as the ship's flare impacted with it. The corridor seemed suddenly filled with smoke.

'Doctor, run!' screamed Anji from in front of him. He obeyed, thankful not for the first time that he had such loyal companions.

The creature was burning but it was coming for him again. The flare must have blown it back down into the engine room. He hit the steps and felt hands pulling him up. 'Close the deck hatch!' he bellowed. 'Close the hatch!'

There came a great screeching from behind. The Doctor guessed that it wasn't in the mood for playing any more. He half-ran, half-staggered up the steps and into Anji's arms. Fitz and another man were already struggling with the clasp for the deck hatch that fitted over the entrance down to the engine level. The power was obviously too low for automatic sealing; they were going to have to haul it over manually. The Doctor noticed the hatch was thick and heavy, maybe even lead-lined to cope with nuclear contamination from the engine room.

The smell of burning creature, pungent and rotten, was increasing, as were the screeches. ‘Come on, come on!’ yelled Anji.

A burning shadow crossed the bottom of the stairs and those empty, hate-filled eyes glared up at him from beneath the hood. Two elongated bony fists clasped the handrail. It poised itself to spring up at them.

‘Gangway!’ shouted Fitz as the hatch swung over. It clanged down into place. Or rather it should have done. Unbelievably, the creature caught the metal plate and stopped its fall. A dead weight like that, plus the force of the swing; that took some doing.

Already, one insect-like hand was scrabbling through the gap it had created.

The Doctor jumped on top of the hatch. It sank, a little, and the creature holding it up howled in anger. Anji joined him with a thump. The hatch creaked downwards, a little bit more.

The hand snaked blindly out for them. Its nails were like steel knives. Fitz dropped his foot on to it and stamped. It slithered out of view.

At last, the other man, whom the Doctor could spot was a native Selonart, joined them on the now somewhat crowded hatch. ‘Push!’ yelled the Doctor.

Slowly, inch by painful inch, the hatch plate dropped into position. The creature fought it all the way but the tremendous weight was too much for even its incredible strength.

Chapter Three

41

At last, it clunked into place, although the creature kept up its desperate struggle with a number of blows that rattled the Doctor’s teeth.

Click. Fitz snapped the first lock home. They had done it. The creature’s muffled punches rang round the deck. Fitz quickly finished the job.

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor, dropping his head. ‘That was. . . close.’

‘What do we do now, Doctor?’ asked Anji, sweat pouring off her

bruised face. He noticed her knuckles were tight and whitening where she still gripped the hatch, unable to trust the locks.

‘What we do now, my dear, is leave.’

Fitz grinned, relieved. ‘Aye aye captain.’

How long had gone on, Bloom did not know. All was a blur.

Oh, he got the beginning good enough. From being found under the sea, pressed by the crew, manacled and shipped aboard this yacht, the big lights and noise of the start, this was clear backwards for him.

This race was clearly the biggest. More Earthers than he’d ever seen. They ferried him in a hovercraft through the tall citadels of the racing boats. Their white and silver hulls leered over Bloom. He felt discomfited by all those knifelike angles. No straight lines on Selonart.

Once aboard, Bloom felt like an exhibit in a zoo, or more aptly a face like on the Earther TVs at which they always stared. The crew would come and visit him in his cell, or ‘cabin’ as they called it, just to look him up. After a while the engines powered up and he felt the boat moving, accelerating madly.

He saw nothing of Selonart except what they told him. Didn’t know what team he was playing for, except they wore grey uniforms.

Adams had said this was a real coup, getting a Second Jen. Bloom himself.

He didn’t know what ‘coup’ meant. Bloom did know what they didn’t, what he never told no one: he was Third Jen.

Bloom had even liked those first few days. Let him do what he loved, although a slave. As the Earther boat snarled its way across the sea, they would drop him down in a metal barrel, suited up in diving stuff and a tube to breathe, and let him feel the currents.

He remembered to close his eyes and not-think. Water felt good churning through him. Under the waves, all silent but the rushing noises. He felt himself melt out through his clothes and become part of water. No headaches, no clumsy Bloom no more. Just movement. Movement and speed. Could Chapter Three

feel the blood of the oceans contract and expand, the breathing of Selonart.

Mind racing ahead along with the currents. He was not-Bloom then; was more. Was everything.

Then they would haul him out on chains and ask questions. Where? How fast? How long? All into machines for turning boat. And then they let him sleep and dream of water. He would have liked to have asked them if he could sleep in the metal barrel but knew they wouldn't be having it. Still, the memories, the feelings of being of the ocean stayed with him, calmed him.

Earthers, the crew, they not like Bloom. Adams, the one who caught him at Alpha, a tall blond beard, brown leather skin man, was in charge of Bloom.

Bringed Bloom food and water to drink. Earth supplies; rich and too-sweet for his tastes.

Adams told him that to Earthers, Bloom seem simple, lumpy. Said natives were creepy. Maybe they not like smell.

Adams was OK. He like Bloom fine, told him once he envied Bloom. How was that? Who would envy stupid Bloom? Adams was a nice guy.

He was the first one to go missing. Captain Jacobi, a stern man who definitely did not like Bloom, thought Adams had gone overboard. Lost at sea.

Maybe thought Bloom had done it, although how would have been interesting as Bloom was chained up when not needed.

Adams was found in hold, tucked away behind containers. This much Captain Jacobi told Bloom. Murdered, in pieces. Almost shot Bloom there and then. Until next crewman disappears. Which is when all goes murky for Bloom.

That night (last night?) Bloom clapped hands over ears. Screams on boat.

Screams and shooting. He remembers that much.

Also, ship's doctor, a small woman called Andersson who had examined Bloom on boarding. She had dashed into his cell, her eyes wide and scared, tears all over her red face.

'Lifeboat, launch the lifeboat. . . oh god. . . ' she had screeched in his face.

'Please, please help me. I don't want to die. . . '

She had hardly known she was releasing him from his chains. 'Bloom.

Help me. Take it away.'

Andersson had led Bloom out of cell. She was as clumsy as he, shaking and clumping into walls. He had noticed her fingernails all torn and bloody.

Her grey uniform tattered and stained. 'It comes at night, Bloom,' she was muttering. 'It comes out of the dark.'

Chapter Three

43

They had reached the fore-deck lounge. Lights were out and Bloom didn't know where he was. Andersson stumbled and clattered through the junk in the lounge and Bloom smelt blood. He couldn't imagine what had happened.

'You can navigate the lifeboat, Bloom,' she gabbled. 'I've always liked you. . .

been your friend. . . '

Just as Bloom tried to think how to calm Andersson down, she had stopped, right at the door. In front of her, something had rustled. A big shape, descending slowly.

'Bloom. . . ' the ship's doctor had murmured. 'Please. . . '

Bloom saw thin razor claws emerge from the shadows and something that grinned like teeth on a skull. Andersson just stared at it, hypnotised. She was sobbing as it lowered itself over her. She squealed. 'Take him. Don't kill me, I brought him to you.' There was a cackle and animal noises. And then Andersson was screaming, just like the others.

Bloom ran. He turned and ran and somehow got into the ducts, the shrieks ringing around him.

Where he had stayed while the creature had sniffed for him. How

long? A day? A week?

'And then we turned up,' said the big one called Fitz who had hit Bloom.

'Keep moving,' snapped the Doctor. 'I really don't think a hatch is going to contain that thing for long.'

There came a tremendous crash and a squeal of plastic and metal from where they had just hurriedly vacated.

'I really don't. The TARDIS, I think.'

'Doctor, what is that thing?' asked the girl, Anji.

Bloom found himself leading the way up, although he didn't really know where they were going.

'Later, Anji, later,' said the Doctor. 'Apart from anything else, this yacht is going to explode at any moment.'

'Same old same old,' said Fitz, and to Bloom he seemed to be enjoying himself.

At last, Bloom was out in the air again. The breeze hit him like the electric shock he had once had fiddling with an old speedboat engine. It cleared the dust from his brain. Selonart air. His air. The tang of the sea flossed his splayed nostrils. For some reason, he felt like crying. His hunger, his thirst, his fear, all gone.

Chapter Three

44

The wind was beginning to rise and the white capped crests of the waves shone in the new day. Clouds massed ominously through the grey dawn light. He should have jumped in right at the beginning. The ocean would have looked after him, would have protected him. Like it always did.

'Not one of our longer adventures,' quipped Fitz. 'Let's get the hell out of here.'

There was a blue box on deck, the occasional brave wave sheeting water over it. For the first time Bloom understood just how fast the yacht was travelling. The sea was rough and the boat was beginning to buck. The wind blew harder over him.

The blue box was an unremarkable box but these strangers were all dash-ing towards it. Bloom watched them go. What did they intend to do? Where was their boat, their helijet?

The Doctor, a strange looking Earther, but with something about him that Bloom instinctively liked, turned back.

‘Come on!’ he yelled.

As he usually did, Bloom did what he was told. It was ingrained in him: deference to Earthers. You rarely knew why but it was what they expected.

Aware of their gazes, Bloom lolloped after them.

And stopped. And pointed.

In the dipping and rising of the yacht, Bloom saw something crawl slowly and deliberately over the blue box. Fuzzy in the thick, moist morning air, it resembled some nocturnal crabby insect caught out by the early morning.

And then: not an insect, he thought. The creature was a man. A dead man, its skin brown and liquid over its rotten bones.

It slithered on to the roof, tattered remnants of billowing clothing over its thin frame.

Bloom saw the Doctor’s face change as he tried to understand. Look at blue box, Bloom tried to say.

His mouth went dry as Anji, looking at him, reached the box.

‘Run!’ screeched Bloom, although the word came out as nothing more than a panicked wail.

At last, the Doctor turned. Anji was petrified, caught in front of the creature as it reached its arms out for her. Just like Andersson, thought Bloom, frozen in fear. It did something to you, it held you in its gaze. He realised that it was doing this deliberately; that somehow it could.

Chapter Three

nose-dived and although Bloom instinctively bent with the drop, he watched the others topple. A wall of water thrust itself over them. The engines were piling the vessel right into the heart of the storm. Salt stung Bloom's eyes and the roaring of the ocean clapped against his ear drums.

The scene cleared, like someone had wiped it dry.

Fitz, moving when the wave hit, had been driven backwards. He struggled, blinking the water away as his hands clutched at the deck rails. The Doctor was head down, forcing himself to stay on his feet, spitting out sea water.

Anji was on the deck floor, whether because of the creature's attack or the power of the crashing wave Bloom could not tell. Water pooled over the deck. Ropes and fittings were sliding everywhere.

As for the creature, it was gone. The blue box wobbled precariously, water streaming down its sides.

The spell was broken. Bloom knew he had to help. He had watched for long enough.

He lumbered forward, his gait naturally aiding his balance. He rushed past the Doctor to the prone girl. For some reason, he felt good. He felt like raising his head and howling into the storm. This was wild, this was free.

Almost without knowing it, Bloom lifted Anji up. She was all right, just stunned. A purple bruise was just emerging on her temple. She had probably hit her head on the deck when she fell.

The Doctor clapped a hand on his shoulder, just as the yacht dipped again.

'We must get into the TARDIS. The engines!' Bloom could hardly hear him in the crash of the wave. They were more prepared this time. Bloom saw the Doctor hurriedly swing his arms round a deck post as the mountain of water engulfed him. Bloom shut his eyes and held on to Anji. The booming in his ears and then it was over. He shook his unwieldy head. All four of them were soaked to the skin.

'Oh god,' said Fitz from somewhere behind. 'The TARDIS. . . '

Bloom turned to look. He didn't know what a TARDIS was but the blue box was gone. Just swept off the deck. The others looked on,

stunned.

The Doctor was biting his lip, scanning the boiling waves through which this boat insisted on punching. He could hear the engines, even above the storm.

'Lifeboat,' said Bloom. He was going to have to take command here.

The Doctor looked back at him. For a moment, Bloom saw indecision

Chapter Three

46

there, even resignation, but instantly a control snapped in. The Doctor nodded. 'Lifeboat it is. Lead on, Mr Bloom.'

Hi folks, Fitz here.

Well, you can guess what we thought when we lost the TARDIS. I mean, washed overboard into an open ocean on a planet that was *just* ocean. Even if it didn't sink to the bottom, how the hell were we going to find it when all four of us were cowering inside that flimsy little lifeboat?

We got the thing on the sea pretty quick, despite the storm. No big deal, I guess they're designed for a speedy exit. That's what a lifeboat's for, right?

Right.

The spirits were a little low, even for old Fitz here, no shame in admitting that, but what can you do? TARDIS swept away, we were on a yacht full of dead folks in the middle of a storm, some Dracula type thing was after us and the whole situation was about to become very complicated what with the engines about to explode into pieces and everything.

Now, you may be wondering why did no one from the race come and sort this mess out weeks ago? I know you're thinking there're satellites and television and all sorts of super-technological radar stuff and good old fashioned morse code that should have alerted the race organisers. Well, we'll come to that. Suffice it to say, already the Doctor's mind was involved in a little race all of his very own; his razor sharp brain was working it all out like crazy.

And that was part of the puzzle that he took into account.

‘So Doctor,’ I asked confidently. ‘What’s going on and what was that thing?’

Oh, before we go on, must describe the explosion that blew up the yacht.

As I said, me and Bloom (a man about whom I still had one or two suspicions, you know what I mean; oh he’d just hidden in the ducts had he . . .

?) had just pulled all the pins out of the stays for the lifeboat and the thing sprang into action right in front of us. I’d never seen anything like it. A panel opened in the deck at the stern end of the yacht, painted with the usual yellow and black warnings. Down through the gap, I could see a little room with some seats and a computer clicking off some numbers. A strip light flickered on, looking very warm and inviting compared to the grey storm out here.

The Doctor leaped in and me and Bloom lowered Anji down. She was starting to mumble now and was really going to have a headache when she woke up.

Chapter Three

47

‘Quickly now,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’re out of time.’

Bloom and me jumped in, there was a funny smell of rubber or something; the Doctor punched home the big red button and then. . . whoa nellie!

There was a kick like we’d been fired out of a gun. I tell you, I hadn’t been expecting that baby. It was only later that I saw there were seat belts to strap you down. Only the Doctor hadn’t bothered with that.

When we’d finished rolling around, I picked pieces of the interior of the lifeboat off my head: cushions, bits of equipment, Anji. It was certainly turning out to be one hell of a day.

This lifeboat was like being inside a large inflatable football. The walls were white rubber or something and the sea gave us a royal kicking around.

Still, there was money here; the interior was luxuriously furnished, like one of those capsules that Bond always ends his films in with his

Bond Lady.

Could have been worse.

There were some little portholes through which I looked out at the yacht behind us. I saw the vessel and I have to say it was a beautiful looking thing.

It dipped once and then the whole back half erupted in a glow of orange flame. The whole damn boat just burst apart. And that black creature on it too, I hoped. There was something...unholy about that thing. I hoped I'd never see it again. Scared the pants off me I don't mind admitting. I whistled in admiration. 'In the words of the prophet,' I said, 'that was a close call.'

As you may imagine, I wasn't too uplifted to see the Doctor shake his head.

'It's not over yet. Those engines are neutron based, fusion mixed with compressed solar uranium. They'll be ruptured now and heading straight down. Once the water pressure around the cores becomes critical, well...'

'In English?'

'Nuclear explosion. In about forty seconds. I'd better work out how to steer this lifeboat. And hope it's shielded or we're liable to have a lousy afternoon.'

I heard Anji moan from the depths and I can't say I blamed her. 'It just gets better and better.'

What with being soaked to the skin and beaten up and losing the TARDIS, you can imagine how much I embraced this new cheery fact. 'Someone's really got it in for us.' I looked out at the thick smoking ruin of the yacht, now halfway sunk into the billowing waves.

When I turned back, the Doctor was tentatively picking at the Flash Gordon-esque white steering column packed full of buttons and knobs. After a second, he looked at the oversized Bloom who had lodged himself into one Chapter Three

'Any ideas?' the Doctor asked him.

Bloom shook his head.

The Doctor shrugged. 'Oh well. Once again: hang on to something.'

He flicked some switches and pushed every button he could find.

Folks, I have experienced some g-pull in my time, in some of the strangest possible craft you can imagine, but I have never simultaneously felt crushed and stretched by seemingly impossible physical forces. Furthermore, I would not recommend such a process. However, that is what happened.

The powerful little motors screeched and we were off. Everyone on board screamed. Once again, we were rolling round the cramped interior: Anji's feet here, Bloom's gaping eyes there, the Doctor's sprawling limbs everywhere.

'That can't be right,' I heard the Doctor speaking, quite calmly, 'we're underwater.'

And then came the nuclear blast from the engines. A sudden, quite simple, searing light filled the lifeboat (thank god no one was looking out of the portholes). I felt sick. Time seemed to stop. I knew it was coming, we all did.

Which is when a gigantic fist propelled by a bolt of pure noise punched my lights out.

You know that thing, like you've died and gone to heaven? Well, that was me when I woke up.

There was Anji looking down at me from a totally clear blue sky (and although I'd never tell anyone, she hasn't got a half bad face at that). I was lying on a mattress or something and she was dropping water into my mouth.

The sun was high in the sky and there was nothing to do but sunbathe.

Shame about the sledgehammer that piled into my skull about two seconds later but that's life. You can't have everything.

I moaned a little and tried to sit up. Anji's cool brown hand pushed me back down. 'Watch it you big lump,' she said, although not

altogether unten-derly. ‘You’ve got a bruise the size of a second head.’

Actually, I didn’t need reminding because when I ground my neck to look around someone let the builders in and they began drilling the foundations.

So I went back to sleep.

When I next awoke it was a relief to be able to see straight.

Chapter Three

49

‘Glad you could join us at last, Fitz,’ said the Doctor breezily. Like the TARDIS hadn’t been washed into a limitless ocean and we hadn’t been caught up in a nuclear blast at all. Yeah, I hadn’t forgotten that.

I sat up and realised the lifeboat was a convertible. Someone had pressed a switch or something and opened the top up. We were drifting in an empty ocean. The Doctor was meddling with the steering column. Well, he’d taken it apart and was polishing the components but I don’t think it was for decorative reasons.

‘How bad is it?’ I moaned.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘Well, we’re alive. And finally I’ve managed to send out an effective SOS, so hopefully it won’t be much longer.’

‘How long have we been adrift?’

‘Oh, a couple of days or so.’

What? Days? What had hit me on the head? Mars? I stared at him wondering whether he was playing a trick.

Anji rinsed out her hankie and placed it over her head, lowering herself gracefully on to the side of the lifeboat, this looking now like a massive inflatable dinghy. She dangled her bare legs in the water. ‘Yeah, you missed the boring bit. Stuck underwater while we got out of the way of the nuke.

While we spent all our valuable time nurse-maiding you.’

‘Watch out for sharks,’ I said. Pithy.

‘Ha ha.’

I looked around for Bloom. He wasn't there. 'Where's our square-headed friend?'

The Doctor frowned. 'Now, Fitz. The last thing I expected from you was prejudice. He's a native Selonart. Human, but adapted to this planet's conditions. For some reason, their bodies have evolved incredibly quickly to these conditions. Very odd. But not abnormal.'

I waved a dismissive hand at him. I'm too old to be lectured.

Just then, that very same square head erupted from the sea, right beside the boat. The sun made the splashing water glitter. How long had he been down there? And had he heard me?

He nodded at the Doctor, as if confirming a secret fact. He threw something into the lifeboat. It looked like a shard of ice. 'More. Doctor, more,' he said.

Bloom hauled himself aboard, sprinkling cold water over Anji, which lightened my day.

Chapter Three

50

'Look at this, Fitz,' said the Doctor. In that tone of voice which meant in no way was I going to understand.

'It's ice. Isn't it?'

'No. Not exactly. I don't know what it is, but it's starting to form around us.'

'Of course it's ice,' I said, utterly confidently. I grabbed the knifelike piece.

And knew instantly I was wrong.

It wasn't cold. It was . . .

I thought my headache must be coming back because I went all woozy.

Now, you know me, and even if you don't and have been paying attention to all the things that have fallen on me and smashed into me and generally had a go since we landed on Selonart, you have to understand: I do not get woozy.

Except this time. A definite wooze vibe.

I started seeing two of everything. Not in a head-blasting ‘I’m the jailer and one of the prisoners sounds sick so I’m going to open the door and see what’s the mat-ARRGGHH!’ type way. Not that, no. Just that what I saw seemed to. . . refract, like split with a prism. I looked down at my hand which held the ice and saw two hands. They both moved, almost together but not quite.

Sounds too, a voice that broke in half and slightly, ever so slightly went out of synch. Then the two became three, again just slightly overlapping. It was an odd feeling, odd and. . . slightly. . . slightly. . .

‘Fitz!’ Something slapped a hand and, as if a passenger in my own body, I watched the shard fall from my grip.

Slowly, the world around me coalesced. Became one again. I watched the shard melt across the damp floor of the lifeboat.

A mechanical roar boomed in the distance. An engine. I saw a glint of metal in the cloudless sky and heard the whine of rotors. Rescue. Well, I hoped it was rescue. ‘Something is happening to the water. . . ’ said the Doctor, ominously. He lifted his head and stared out across the still, gentle sea.

Chapter Four

As mysteriously as they had gone off, the tele-sats and comms systems blinked back on-line again. Swarms of technicians, amongst their ranks stressed technical team leaders unable to deliver on the assurances and hy-perbolic promises of their software salesman, overpaid and ignorant IT ‘solution providers’, apathetic inter-orbital telecom engineers and all the rest, were simultaneously amazed and mightily relieved (for in the Empire, failure to provide adequate technical support was a capital crime) when all the lights and noises inexplicably started up again.

A number of conspiracy theories were marketed, most fervently by the software providers themselves. Clearly, the total and utter failure of all communications systems on and around Selonart couldn’t possibly be the fault of hastily written and under-supported software. It had to be a conspiracy.

Or, more likely, a number of them.

Only the actual participation of the Proudhon Confederation in the

race, and the fact that their vessel had been equally stricken by the mysterious failure, had prevented some of the larger Systems Management corporations sending in their space navies to obliterate that handful of self-sufficient and valueless anarchist planets.

Around Selonart, as the angry and frustrated spectators picked up where they had left off with the race, as the bookies and touts wiped the sweat of a million potentially voided bets away, as the guests in the inter-orbital hotels stopped panicking (having not unreasonably assumed that their luxury floating palaces were about to drop into Selonart's atmosphere), and lawyers licked their lips ready to begin feeding off the carrion of this disaster, the question became one angry shout from the wealthy and sports-obsessed: who had done this, why, and how much pain could they withstand before they actually died?

As for Governor Marius, gibbering and weeping in his palace, his reaction to the good news was understandable. He fainted.

Screens flickered back into life as cursing technicians sat and watched.

51

Chapter Four

52

The palace on Beta Marina, to where the governing party had decamped, was ankle-deep in scribbled and torn paper, for two days the only method of communication apart from talking face to face. Nothing had worked: phones, televisions, computers. Anything that could be used to transmit a signal had just curled up and died.

Now, beeps and bells and jingles and rings celebrated the rebirth of the stricken colony. Already the Governor's marketing team were working on methods of turning this into a PR triumph: a race where the unpredictable could still happen, where technology was cutting edge. . . where excitement was the name of the game.

Even the destruction of the MikronCorps yacht was not necessarily a bad thing. Well, as long as it could be satisfactorily explained. As he watched the financial screens, Governor Marius noted with pleasure that the wreck of the vessel had instigated a whole new round of frenzied recalculating and odds-jiggling. Money throughout the empire was going crazy. Nothing like a few deaths to add a little spice. With such a mediated media event as this, boredom and predictability were the worst that could happen.

So, despite the still unexplained blackout, the Governor was in a good mood. A mere two hours ago he had been expecting the self-termination invitation from Earth; now he could safely hope for a medal.

His mood improved immeasurably (oh, happy day!) when Administrator Peck, still clad in his dull and efficient Admin bureau uniform, brought news that survivors of the wreck of the MikronCorps yacht had been found drifting in the ocean. With, apparently, a tale so outrageous they had to be the saboteurs themselves!

The Governor nodded sagely, thinking about his address to the waiting planet. His mind was full of difficult decisions. Address the planet now?

Have the survivors executed in secret to avoid difficult questions? Parade them in front of the cameras? Critical, crucial decisions that needed to be resolved by a strong-willed individual to handle the situation in the best possible manner.

Yes! He banged an unequivocal fist on the desk. Governor Marius had made his decision. He had decided to consult his PR manager immediately.

Brough gave the thumbs up. At last. He was sick of lying splayed out on a plastic raft with his head in a number 612 Mikron-Telecoms relay array. For the last two days he had been sailing from platform to platform, every single Chapter Four

53

platform in his sector, to attempt, like every single technician on Selonart, to work out why none of their expensive and failure-proof comms technology was working.

The crew were fed up with having to ferry him across this endless, unchanging ocean when they could have been living it up in one of the Marinas. By now, they had irrevocably intertwined his failure to solve the blackout with his being the cause of it. Murray, the producer and skipper of his little tech-schooner, had stopped speaking to Brough and could hardly bear to have him on board. They had already been joking that Brough was famed throughout the technical media companies for his lack of enthusiasm and Jonah-like ability to bring bad luck to those around him.

The race was supposed to be the big comms company junket that had

the additional luxury of big, fat bonuses for those who signed up. The last thing anyone had expected was that they would have to do any work. Murray would regret his baiting of Brough when he realised that there was, in fact, work to be done. It was Murray whose head was on the block.

A day and a half of fruitless diagnostics and Brough started losing the will to live. The producer's nagging was driving him crazy.

Then, just as he fitted and re-fitted another circuit board and another set of crystal optic couplings in the vain hope that by replacing everything something somewhere would work, it all came back. As if it had never been away.

Sweat leaked into Brough's mouth and eyes as he lay on his back staring up at the number 612 Mikron-Telecoms relay array. Lights blinked green in the tiny diagnostic panels. Why, he had no idea. He just dropped his micro-multi-spanfixer and lay back on the gently bobbing plastic. Crackling voices squelched in the walkie-talkie in his collar. It was all going to be all right. He gave the thumbs up.

Right, Brough thought. Back to Alpha Marina and that little bar in the hotel complex where he had intended spending most of this contract. The native blockhead barman, for all his clumsiness, fixed a mean Proximan Ice Tea cocktail. And there were those female sports reporters from the Greer Colonies, the ones who acted aloof and cold but Brough knew were worth further investigation. . .

He hauled himself out from under the array and stood up, blinking away salty tears in the sun. Even Murray was smiling. Brough felt resentment towards his boss, who had spent these days of emergency either swimming or lounging in the schooner with Gus and Dauphine, sipping drinks whilst he Chapter Four

54

worked like a Second Jen.

'Oh, congratulations!' Murray yelled, lifting his cocktail glass aloft. It wasn't difficult to catch the sarcasm. Brough felt like saying something, then realised he couldn't be bothered. The emergency was over. He could go back to his swimming pool and his iced tea. He turned off his tools and hurled them into his canvas rucksack.

There was a sudden swell in the platform, causing Brough to stagger. Typical, he thought, you finish the job and the weather turns nasty.

Just typical.

He picked up his bag and headed towards the schooner. Murray was already charging the engine.

The creature lifted its head from the sea on a high, high scaly neck. Water cascaded from its toothy jaws over Murray, Gus and Dauphine. A pair of black, lifeless eyes glared at the platform, at the schooner, at Brough.

Brough dropped his rucksack. He felt his knees give way as he stared up at the gigantic thing. All he could think of was that he knew. . . he knew. . .

that there was no indigenous life on Selonart. None at all. Didn't the sea monster know that?

It roared and the head plunged down again, sending the platform and the schooner rocking.

Murray, Gus and Dauphine played statues for a second, then panicked.

Brough watched as a line of water, a fast moving wave, streaked away from the boat. If the head, that sharklike head was that big, then how big was. . .

The schooner fired into action. Brough was rooted to the spot. Instinctively, he found he had wrapped his arms round the number 612 Mikron-Telecoms relay array. He was muttering.

The line of foamy water broke over the platform. The creature had dived, dived deep. Brough knew it hadn't got bored and gone away. His natural pessimism refused to allow that possibility.

It took a moment for him to realise that Murray was abandoning him here.

The schooner revved and lurched; Gus and Dauphine – *his* tech team – casting off ropes. The platform lurched and Brough moaned.

'Murray!' he screeched, 'Murray!'

Murray didn't even turn.

The schooner gave a squeal of too much-acceleration then something very large and very fast blasted out of the ocean and dragged it under. Brough heard one scream and caught a glimpse of a man ground

instantly into a red rag by a set of gigantic canines and then the whole thing was gone. Water swirled round to fill the gap in the ocean
Chapter Four

55

where the schooner had been. The platform bobbed and rocked in the swell.

Brough clasped the relay array as it tipped, loose equipment spilling into the sea.

‘Oh god. . . oh god. . . ’ Brough moaned, climbing the signalling antenna.

How could it be here? How could it? Almost instinctively, panicked fingers activated the SOS beacon locked into all the relay arrays. He peered into the tiny camera as it glinted at him. He knew it was too late.

‘Help me,’ he moaned at the unblinking circle of glass. ‘It’s a monster, a sea serpent or. . . come and get me for Christ’s sake!’ He felt tears mingle with the perspiration in his eyes as the platform once again rocked in a tremendous upwards swell.

Pieces of wreckage began to surface. Pieces of boat. Brough held on for dear life. He peered down at the calm, transparent water, afraid to look.

More afraid not to.

‘You can’t exist. . . ’ he muttered, ‘you can’t be here. . . ’ as he watched the creature rise like an express train from the depths, jaws open.

Administrator Peck took personal charge of the escort to the Governor’s Palace. He was intrigued by the calmness with which the prisoners deported themselves. Perhaps they felt the evidence too flimsy to get them executed.

If they thought that, they clearly didn’t know the Governor. And who else could be responsible for the detonation of the most shielded, most failsafed nuclear engines in the galaxy?

But there was something in the Doctor’s story, something that just pulsed with truth. If Peck wasn’t so worldly and suspicious, he would have said he was convinced because the Doctor was a good man.

He sat with them as they were strapped into the hovercraft's restraining seats. The guards had trouble with the oversized clumsy Bloom. Peck had heard of the hulking native before, his reputed powers of affinity with the oceans were legendary on Selonart. However, this was the first time that Peck had actually seen him. His reflex distaste for the ugly, the deformed, made him look away quickly. Bloom took ugly a whole new dimension on from the other Second Jens. Peck convinced himself it was pity he was feeling.

He looked down at his clipboard once more. He reviewed the names. 'The Doctor' (hmm), Anji Kapoor, Fitz Kreiner. Aliases the lot of them, no doubt.

As the hovercraft made its run towards the basalt column that comprised half the land mass on Selonart, Peck remained intrigued at the stoicism these Chapter Four

56

companions exhibited.

They were pretty badly beaten up when the helijet found them. Cuts and bruises everywhere. The one called Fitz was half-dead and would have been fully dead without treatment.

Peck was starting to think that something must have attacked them on the yacht. Not anything involving cloaked skeletons but something much more simple. He glanced up at Bloom, squeezed into his seat. It was said they had the strength of ten. And Bloom was a renowned exceptional native. Were the Doctor and the others covering up for him? Why? What was the point of blowing up the yacht at all?

His previous suspicions came back to him. This whole affair smelled of conspiracy, of the sweaty nervousness of being the only one who knew. Peck didn't like that; in the imperium it did not do to let oneself become isolated.

He needed to investigate, to find the strands that held the web together.

The Governor had wanted maximum publicity, a fleet of journalistic vidders to send out the reassuring pictures to the galaxy. The blackout and then the terrifying realisation that a nuclear explosion had destroyed the MikronCorps yacht had understandably sent waves of panic around and above Selonart.

There was talk of safety checks on the other yachts, of sponsorship deals collapsing. Of the betting cartels suing for incompetence; of crews striking, worried about their safety (although the Governor didn't concern himself overmuch with that one).

What the hell had happened to the MikronCorps boat? The log was off-line, had been since the blackout. All that was certain was that a limited nuclear explosion had been triggered one thousand three hundred kilometres from the Stage Two race marker.

Governor Marius, once sufficient tranquillisers had been administered, was forced into finding the first available scapegoats for the accident/terrorist attack/whatever it was. After all, imperial procedure was procedure. So as soon as word of the MikronCorps lifeboat came through, the Governor decided whoever survived was to be blamed and executed as soon as legally possible. He dispatched Peck to get the job done. A nice botched escape attempt on the rescuing helijet would have been best. A firefight in the sky filmed by the galaxy's press; the brave heroics of the government forces on visual record. Whilst briefing Peck, the Governor was practically salivating at his own inventiveness.

Chapter Four

57

Peck, however, had managed to persuade his employer to at least hang fire until some kind of explanation had been given.

The Governor may have embraced a quick and very final solution, but Peck had had his doubts even then.

He had arranged for the saboteurs to be held on the floating Beta Marina Office Park, an artificial island occasionally used for admin when land just got too tight, just within sight of the tall basalt cylinder of Beta itself. A breathing space to at least get some facts straight.

Through the porthole of this imperial hovercraft, he looked back at the gunmetal-grey doughnut shape of the office park. The prisoners had been in such a physical state when he arrived it had been difficult even to get a word out of them. God knows what would have happened if they'd been forced to participate in the Governor's fantasy battle with imperial marines.

Peck looked back to his laptop screen again, away from those blue

waves.

If truth be told, he was not a fan of the ocean, didn't like travelling on it.

Furthermore, Peck was not a fan of the Selonart Trans-Global Regatta. It was a wasteful exercise as far as he was concerned; a frippery designed to cause disruption to the real purpose of their presence on the planet, which was of course the administration of its lands (or seas in this case) and its peoples in the furtherance of the Terran imperium. How were they supposed to work out just what they were supposed to exploit from Selonart if they spent all their time making sure this game ran smoothly? It made money, yes, it was romantic and glorious and all that, but was it practical?

Whatever his opinion, however, Peck had no interest in seeing the race damaged by this. . . this mystery. Always cautious, he blamed himself for not making Governor Marius investigate the still-overdue submarine. First that, then the two day systems blackout, then the nuclear explosion and now a panicked fairy story about sea monsters in the lifeless Selonart oceans.

There was a design here. A plan, and Peck thought he knew from whence this had originated. Peck had been doing some checking. However, Peck was a wise enough administrator to know that checking alone was not evidence.

He would not accuse without evidence. Emotion should never be allowed to colour the facts. Procedure, procedure, procedure.

The hovercraft pilot indicated that they were almost at Beta Marina. Peck nodded efficiently. Question the saboteurs again. Forcefully. He was certain this was where he would find his evidence.

The pilot flicked the switch to activate the hovercraft klaxon. They were Chapter Four

58

approaching a skeletal superstructure built around the central stone column in the Marina. The Imperial Marina. Peck noticed that the port was full of executive yachts. The heavy-hitters were here, along with the press of course, all demanding a quick and convenient explanation. The Governor would not be easy, he didn't handle pressure well, it wasn't his strong point.

The whole point of Selonart was that nothing happened, that nothing went wrong. The Governor was nothing more than a sales executive appointed to market and administer the regatta. But now something had gone wrong and Peck's hour had come.

A metal panel in the side of the structure opened silently. Peck took a deep breath. He would get to the bottom of this. Calmly and rationally. Procedure.

As the hovercraft edged its way into the central pool of the Beta Marina for their appointment with Governor Marius, Peck allowed himself a tight smile.

He knew what he was doing. He could handle the Governor.

'Look! Tell me what you were doing there or I'll blow your brains out over the bloody desk!' Governor Marius screamed at the Doctor. 'You've been winding me up for two hours. Just tell me!' Tears of rage boiled on his large, florid cheeks and his flamboyant robes of office flapped as he waved his arms around. His curly orange hair bristled with self-righteous anger.

Peck noticed that the Doctor did not even blink. Marius so clearly wanted, he really wanted, to smash the prisoner's teeth out. Once again Peck was embarrassed by this idiot. It wasn't working out quite as he had anticipated.

He hadn't realised this Doctor could be the most annoying person in the galaxy.

Peck had brought him in first, as he was clearly the leader. Go straight to the heart of the problem. He now had one or two doubts about that decision.

'May I remind you, Governor,' stated the Doctor, 'Amendment Sixteen, Section Four, Sub-section Twelve, Paragraph 3-A of the Imperial Code of Conduct Manifesto, clearly states that physical and verbal threats towards a re-manded but otherwise uncharged prisoner can only be pursued by following the guidelines outlined in...'

'I don't care!' the Governor screamed. 'I'm in charge!'

'Besides,' replied the Doctor. 'You should really have a gun when you threaten me. Pointing a finger just doesn't have the same psychological *oomph*...'

Peck stepped in before the Doctor got himself killed. ‘Governor, if you would allow me?’

The Governor slumped back into his large, ornate chair behind his large, ornate desk. He waved an idle glove at Peck and the administrator realised he was bored of this. Marius was ruddy faced and breathing heavily. The Doctor and his companions had just been sentenced to death.

‘What were you doing on that yacht?’ Peck asked, in what he hoped was a more rational tone. ‘You and your compatriots. How did you get aboard?

And don’t give me any fairy stories about blue boxes and travelling through space.’

The Doctor sighed. ‘We really don’t have time for this, Mr Peck. Someone is behind these apparently unconnected events but it isn’t us. We’re here to help you.’

‘Sent by whom?’

His adversary tapped his nose. ‘I can’t tell you that. Suffice it to say that we are on the trail of a very deadly opponent and it is more than likely that it was he who was behind the destruction of that ship. And the creature that killed the crew.’

The Governor shook his head confidently. Now the decision was made, Marius had calmed down. He had something to tell the angry executives waiting outside.

Peck continued. ‘Why should I believe a word of this, when the simple explanation is that you three, together with the native. . .’

'The man's name is Bloom.'

'You set the nuclear engines to overload on board the yacht, made your getaway, got into trouble. You were doing a job, a contract, on behalf of some employer. Perhaps you were double-crossed by that employer and left to perish in the explosion. In my experience, Doctor, the simple explanations are inevitably the correct ones.'

The Doctor leaned forward and Peck couldn't help but be taken in by his strange, deep eyes. Eyes that stared fixedly into him. 'With Sabbath,' he said softly, 'nothing is simple.'

Right. That was it. Peck tore his gaze away from the Doctor. He looked at Marius and there was murder in the man's eyes.

He had doubts but he knew his duty. He coughed and flicked a switch on his laptop.

'I am formally charging you and your companions with piracy, murder and Chapter Four

60

terrorism. Under galactic and Selonart law, all of these are deemed capital offences and your usual rights of appeal and representation are to be waived until such notice of official citizenship status is documented.'

'In other words, you're going to execute us without trial.'

'Furthermore, Bloom will face the additional charge of mutiny.'

'For a ship on to which he was press-ganged? That's ridiculous. And you know it.'

Marius stood up, wincing as the chair scraped the floor. He was going to make an 'important pronouncement'.

'I don't make the laws, I merely implement them.'

A moral coward as well as an idiot, thought Peck. A joke. This wasn't right, this wasn't right at all.

The Doctor took his fate calmly. 'How many men in history have covered up their crimes with those very same words? I lose count. . . '

Governor Marius avoided his gaze. Instead, he flicked a switch on his desk.

'I want an official declaration of legal termination recorded for the planetary log.' The clown smiled cheesily. 'Good bye, Doctor. We shan't meet again.'

He waved Peck and the prisoner away.

'It would be simpler for you to tell me who employed you. I might be able to do something.' Peck didn't know why he was whispering as he accompanied the Doctor to the lift that led straight up to the cells on the top floor.

For the first time since they had met, the Doctor appeared thrown. He glanced round at the youthful guards escorting them to the lifts. 'You suspect someone?'

'Only facts interest me, Doctor. If you have something to tell me, then tell me. You'll be dead in twelve hours if you don't.'

'Why should you care, Mr Peck? Don't you want a nice, neat parcel that helps your promotion prospects? I should imagine you will do rather well out of our deaths.'

Peck stopped at the lift. He didn't want to answer because he didn't have an answer. Without evidence, Peck couldn't function.

'Who do you really suspect, Mr Peck?' the Doctor asked bluntly.

Peck stabbed at the lift buttons. He pointedly ignored the Doctor by coughing into his shiny administrator's gloves.

The guards shoved the Doctor in and followed. Peck felt oddly embarrassed, standing nose to nose as they waited for the doors to close. The Chapter Four

61

Doctor was staring at him, apparently calm and unruffled. 'Watch the water,'

he said as the two halves cancelled him out.

Watch the water?

What did that mean?

However, it was the previous question that had Administrator Peck really stumped. Who do you suspect?

What answer could he give? He had nothing, no proof. Nothing except a feeling, an unease. He liked order and discipline and everything fitting in the right place.

Peck had overseen the entire logistics of the huge jigsaw that was the Fourteenth Selonart Trans-Global Regatta. Four years work and he knew every balance sheet, every document, every dotted ‘i’ and crossed ‘t’. And there was nothing wrong.

Except something was. He knew it. The Doctor knew it.

Administrator Peck was not a man to be swayed by whims. He couldn’t order a reprieve, he couldn’t face a Governor who so badly wanted them dead and beg for clemency. Not without proof. It was all over; there was nothing more to be said.

So why was he here in the office, at three o’clock in the morning, going through the documents again? Especially the documents pertaining to that late entrant, the enigmatic Count de Vries?

Peck didn’t know the layout of the imperial palace at Beta Marina as well as his own on Alpha. He knew it well enough, but it didn’t contain enough of his ordering to consider it home.

The view was the same though: through the wide windows gouged out of the basalt, the same old dark sky and sea that sat and waited. The air was still. Only the faint, ever-present Selonart *meltemi*, the wind which constantly huffed and puffed around this trunk that rose so improbably from the ocean, gave Peck any feelings of movement, of progress. The scene was so unchanging, so monotonous, that Peck wouldn’t have noticed it even if he had been watching. If only he could spot the irregularity, the glitch. Like the non-scenery on Selonart, perhaps he knew these papers too well.

Always his mind returned to the Doctor. The man knew more than he was telling, Peck was sure. However, he wasn’t lying either. He couldn’t imagine the Doctor being in anyone’s pay. Perhaps if Peck let him look at the documents. . .

Chapter Four

What was he thinking? Release the prisoners, with the galactic media scrutinising them? It would be insane. It would certainly be his job, even if he were proven correct.

He thumped the desk in anger. What was it? What couldn't he see?

'Problems?' came a soft voice from the darkness. Peck felt ice crystallise in his veins. Perspectives tumbled through his mind. What was he doing here?

If there really was a conspiracy, sitting in a darkened office in the middle of the night was like painting a target on your back. He realised just how dark and quiet this office was.

He coughed and spluttered and tried to rein in his panic.

A large powerful shape emerged from the shadows by the lifts. A stubbled head gleamed in the night lights.

'C-Count de Vries?'

A glint of smiling teeth. 'Administrator Peck. You're up late. Thou good and faithful servant.'

Peck blinked, trying to control his hammering heart. 'Aren't you racing?'

What are you doing here?'

De Vries looked out to sea. Peck noticed he was still wearing his bulky fur robes. 'Oh, my yacht just docked at Beta Marina. I came up to see whether any progress had been made with the race.'

Just docked? How could that be? Even the imperial yacht itself was hours away. 'I'm sorry?'

'The sabotage. The prisoners.'

What did he know? How could he know? For heaven's sake, Peck didn't even know himself. It was coincidence. The man had docked and wanted to know whether the race was still on, that was all.

'It appears that the MikronCorps yacht was destroyed deliberately. Four suspects have been arrested. A cleanup team is on-site to decontaminate the nuclear fallout. The regatta itself is continuing as before.' Peck chose his words carefully.

The Count moved closer. ‘That makes me glad, Mr Peck. Snug and secure.’

Peck sensed the powerful man had moved too close to him. Sensitive to these things, Peck disliked proximity as much as he disliked giving way to unseemly emotional outbursts. The Count seemed to give off an aura, something. . . dangerous, as if he were a beast pretending to be a man.

Why was he thinking like this? Peck knew if he had a claim to fame it would be for his lack of imagination. Well, it had chosen a hell of a time to Chapter Four

63

suddenly wake up.

‘And the Doctor?’

‘The Doctor?’ How could the Count know about him? No names had been given out to the press. And if he’d just arrived. . .

‘You don’t believe he’s guilty do you? You have. . . doubts.’

Peck remained immobile. He was tense; any tenser and he felt he would break like a china figurine. He realised that he was more afraid than he had ever been in his life. Count de Vries wasn’t doing anything more than standing a little too close but Peck felt like he was facing some machine, some creature that could tear him to pieces at a moment’s notice, holding itself barely in check.

‘What did he say to you?’ said the Count softly.

‘You know the Doctor?’ The words were choked. He could hardly get them out through his tight mouth.

‘Our paths have crossed. He is. . . tenacious. When are you planning to set him free?’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ And Peck realised that this was what he had been deciding all night.

For a second, Peck saw the mask slip. The Count’s mouth seemed to widen and he felt the boiling rage surge over. In an instant the man had controlled himself.

‘Of course you don’t. You look tired, Mr Peck. And frightened. Perhaps

we should work together. A burden shared is a burden halved and all that.

What did the Doctor say to you?’

The Count stepped even closer and Peck was forced back to the wall. He couldn’t stop himself shaking. And still the Count remained as smiling and pleasant as ever.

‘He said. . . ’

The Count lowered his head to listen. ‘Yes?’

‘He said: watch the water.’

The head raised. ‘Ah. He’s right, of course.’

‘What do you mean?’ Peck felt himself digging his fingers into the plastic wall. His nails were grinding.

‘Why don’t you go and ask him?’

At last, the Count stepped back. He stood in the darkness, a blurred bulky mass. And smiling, still smiling. Peck breathed deeply. He felt as if he were almost falling away from the wall.

Chapter Four

64

‘Ask him?’

‘I think that would be wise.’

Peck swallowed. He nodded, over-briskly. Tears stung his eyes. He felt reprieved. ‘All right, then. All right. He’s innocent, you know.’

‘Is anybody?’

Unable to meet the Count’s gaze, he walked to the lifts, sheaf of papers in hand.

No one ever saw Administrator Peck again.

Chapter Five

I suppose we all thought the Doctor would return from his ‘meeting’

bearing the great tidings that he had, in his Doctor-y way, talked the ‘Governor’

or whatever pinched little nobody that ran this planet into letting us off the death sentence with which we had been utterly unfairly and inevitably sad-dled with.

Yeah.

When that didn’t happen, we sat in the cells planning an escape.

It was surprising when you looked at Fitz why they had bothered to give him all that medical attention when all they were going to do was kill him anyway. He looked a lot better than he had in that lifeboat. Even I, who wished him dead so often, had been worried.

I stared at yet another blank cell wall and wished we could hurry the escape thing up. It must be getting close to dawn and that, I believed, was when we were for the chop.

Bloom just sat in the corner not saying a word. He was clearly used to this kind of treatment. I didn’t know the sociology of Selonart but racism is racism right? And racism was something I knew a lot about.

Although I’d bitten my nails down to my wrists cacking myself about being executed (OK, wouldn’t you?), I found it more than a little distressing that all the Doctor and Fitz could talk about was those stupid little ice blobs that had appeared in the ocean after we’d surfaced. I mean, I’d heard of denial but this was ridiculous. The time for exposition was later. We needed to get the hell out of here, right?

I felt as if I were in a dream. One of those dreams where you start off with something you have to do. Something so important that it tugs at your stomach with urgency. And then as the dream goes on you get sidetracked.

Maybe someone you know appears in the dream and you follow them. You follow them because you have to and there’s no choice and maybe as well it’s that you want to. But all the time there’s that knowledge, that urgency burning away in you because you should be doing the other thing, the really 65

Chapter Five

important thing, and this is all a diversion and it's leading you away. And then another thing happens. It leads you round another corner and you're doing something else. Which goes on and on and your brain gets fuller and fuller with all these other jobs until you forget what that first important thing is. All that remains is the burning in your stomach, the urgency. And you wake up and all that you know is you're sweating and it's still night and something has gone very, very wrong and you've got to do this important thing but no one can tell you what it is.

Well, that's what I felt like now. Here in this cell that looked like a meeting room in an office in a business park on a trading estate somewhere in the back end of Reading.

That's what I felt like when they brought the Doctor in and he didn't tell us why he had failed to prevent us being executed in the morning. I had that same dreamlike feeling. I was sweating and something had gone very, very wrong.

We kept getting sidetracked (yeah, I know you find these thoughts weird but come on, tell us what you think about when you're sitting there in a cell waiting for the hearty breakfast and the bullet). I wanted to keep my mind in order, in sequence.

The cheap carpet crackled with static as Fitz and I paced across it. The Doctor sat in one of the black plastic chairs around the table. He was so calm I wanted to kill him myself. How come you never knew what he was thinking?

'So, Doctor,' I said. I knew my voice was cracking with strain. Control yourself, girl! 'How did we end up in this? I mean, it's twice removed, isn't it? First there's the fact we're not even in our own universe. This might not even be happening in the real universe. Second remove: I thought we were looking for Sabbath. Two quite simple ambitions, I would have said. Instead, we end up getting shot or thrown off a cliff. For what? Nothing. We've done and learned nothing. The whole thing's ended up as a complete and rather fatal waste of time.'

At last I got a reaction. In the harsh striplight, the Doctor raised an eyebrow about an eighth of an inch. 'Really?'

Fitz suddenly went all defensive. The bandage round his head looked like a crash helmet. 'Hang on Anj. You know the Doctor's got a plan to get us out of this.'

Our so-called saviour seemed to find this statement amusing. His back

Fitz, he smiled.

‘You think so?’

“Course you have, haven’t you, Doctor?”

I put my hands on my head and faced Fitz off. ‘What plan, brain box?’

Fitz blinked; the disarming cow-eyes of the truly stupid. ‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘But I’m not the Doctor, am I?’

I sighed. ‘Look –’

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you both,’ said the Doctor calmly. ‘But I neither have a plan for escape nor do I think our present predicament is a waste of time.’

‘Nice to know that although we’re going to die, it won’t however be totally meaningless. We’re the good guys here!’

‘Anji,’ he almost snapped. But not quite. ‘You must learn. . . ’ He looked up at the ceiling, as if looking for inspiration.

‘Learn what?’

‘I’m not entirely sure. Just learn, I suppose.’

‘Thanks. That’s a help.’ I scraped a chair back. My hair curled with static shocks.

The Doctor leaned forward. ‘There is meaning here. I know there is. A connection. Our ending up here. This isn’t accidental.’

‘Great,’ I said. ‘Now you’re a conspiracy nut.’

There came a voice from the corner. I’d forgotten all about Bloom. Suddenly, I felt foolish, realising I’d been taking my frustration out on the Doctor.

It wasn’t his fault we were stuck in all this. Well, not all his fault anyway.

‘Doctor?’ asked Bloom politely ‘What is wrong with the water?’

'At last! The first sensible question!' bellowed the Doctor, slamming his fist on the table. 'Congratulations, Mr Bloom. What, indeed, is wrong with the water?' He waved a finger in the air and looked knowledgeable. His eyes were wild. Hmph. Wild- *er*.

And that's who he reminded me of all of a sudden. Gene Wilder. As Willie Wonka in the film. The unhinged joyous stare, the loose grin. Oompa Loompa, he was going to tell us everything. We sat. We waited.

We kept waiting.

'Well?' asked Fitz.

'I. . . ' the Doctor jabbed the table with each syllable, '. . . Don't. . . Know. . . '

I sat back. 'Oh god. . . kill me now. . . '

'But! I have an idea. A theory. A hunch.'

Chapter Five

68

Fitz was hooked. Of course he was. He punched his hands, Batman cliché.

'Way to go, Doctor!' I winced. 'What is it?'

'How did you feel when Bloom handed you that. . . that shard from the sea? What happened?'

'I don't know. It was all weird.'

'God is in the details, Fitz.'

Fitz shrugged. 'I don't know. It was. . . it was like I got blurred vision or something. I couldn't see properly. Not just vision though. Everything.'

Everything seemed to. . . split.'

'Right. Mr Bloom, how about you? Please. . . ' and suddenly the Doctor changed from the electro-charged madman into someone very gentle again.

'Please come and sit with us. We need your help. We need to know what you think about this. . . this ice.'

The big fella unfolded himself from the corner and stomped over to the table. He still looked wary but at least he didn't seem afraid of us. Something went in my throat. He looked so lost, so mournful, someone trying so very hard.

Bloom squeezed himself into a seat. Outside, through some scratches in the blacked-out windows, I could see pale blue twinges of daylight. This long night, our last, was nearly over.

'I was under,' Bloom began, 'I felt the ringing, from the explosion like. The water was. . . ringing. I was only in the light water, the sun water. . . not the real stuff. I never been down to the real stuff. Deep down. But all of a sudden, I felt I could go there. Could go there if I just swam deep enough. I mean, I was frightened, what with all the stuff on the yacht and that thing and you lot arriving. But that was outside. In the water, I was inside. I felt I could just keep dropping. Then I saw it. The. . . ice stuff. There was a big clump of it. Just. . . there. Down on the edge of the dark water. It was the water, like I've always known it. The stuff, waiting for me. I can feel the water, see.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I'm afraid I don't, Mr Bloom. How do you "feel" the water?'

The big block head shifted. He wanted us to understand, really he did. I could sense his frustration when his words weren't enough. They couldn't convey anything he felt going on in there.

'It's like Bloom is part of the water. All of it. Moving round, the currents.

Like the ocean's breath. I'm a part of all that when I'm under. Bigger.
More Chapter Five

69

than just Bloom.' He pinched the skin on his arm, almost disgustedly. 'No longer this.'

'And the ice? That was alien? Different?' I could see the Doctor's eyes widen. He thought he was on to something.

'No.' Bloom was staring, thinking himself back to the time when he

swam.

I could imagine him agile then, almost graceful. ‘No. The same. The same but. . . more.’

He came back to us. He was excited, face shining. ‘Don’t you see. The same. But more!’

He returned from the meeting feeling like he’d been thrown into a pit and stoned. Did Execs *never* sleep?

Selonart’s early morning light was staining his quarters crimson when Governor Marius staggered in to get dolled up for the executions.

He found himself out of breath. The threats, the conniving, the berating was endless. They had been frantic about the race, understandably. They wanted to know that the problems were over. The representative from MikronCorps and his army of surgeon-lawyers had promised hair-raising punishments for him and the planet he governed. And they were the ones whose yacht had nuked half of Selonart!

Only the sure knowledge that those responsible had been caught, would be dead by next dark, and that the insurers were going to pay up, prevented Governor Marius losing a considerable amount of his body mass there and then.

After that, he was even more determined to get these executions out of the way as quickly as possible. History had always shown that blood spilt early was never blood wasted.

If one waited it was a legal inevitability that someone, some nosy liberal do-gooder, would later come across contrary evidence that split hairs and got everybody worked up and bogged down in investigations. It always happened. If the suspects were alive it all got messy; if they were dead, it was too late. Imperial law reflected that excellent practice. The Law Corps had insisted on it and as the lack of extra work kept all the zillions of imperial citizens’ legal premiums down to a practical minimum, this principle became standard operating procedure. It all averaged out in the end.

So, he thought, as he threw off the nightclothes he had been wearing when they got him up, let’s draw a line under the whole business and get Chapter Five

them dead.

When Count de Vries turned away from the window and smiled at him, he realised with a sick slump that despite everything, he had still delayed too long.

'Ah, Governor,' said De Vries pleasantly. 'You really do wake up to one of the most enviable views in the galaxy. To a seafaring man such as myself there is nothing more beautiful than the sun rising over a glittering ocean.'

Especially an ocean I am racing on. I am still racing on it, aren't I?'

Dumb, resigned, the Governor could only nod.

De Vries's eyes shone in the sun, like the sea he was describing. He looked at Marius, who was conscious he was still half in his pyjamas.

'Please,' the Count continued, with some. . . amusement in his tone? 'Don't mind me. Finish your. . . robing.'

Marius grabbed a pillow. and sidestepped towards his extensive wardrobe.

He sensed how colourless his face must appear. This was twice today he had been caught by important people whilst bereft of his cosmetics of office.

He dressed quickly, aware of the animal presence on the other side of his walk-in wardrobe. He waited a second, taking a deep breath before calmly opening the door. How had the Count got in? A security chief was going to pay dearly for this.

De Vries was sat outside, on the balcony. He was drinking black coffee and eating the Governor's croissants. There was an unusual oily smell. And smoke. Marius searched his memory. The Count was smoking, smoking a cigar. From far below, there drifted up the sounds of morning life on Beta Marina: engines, shouts, the usual. Nothing natural, for there were no natural sounds on Selonart. Well, maybe the lapping of waves against basalt or something. Even the flies were imported, the descendants of stowaways aboard the first Earth colony ships.

'Ah,' said the Count. 'Now, let's talk.'

Marius sat. 'About?'

'About why you must release the Doctor and his companions.'

He sighed. Of course. Of course. Why was nothing ever easy?

The Count glanced down at an official-looking document on the breakfast table. 'From Earth Central. A clear and unambiguous directive.'

'My dear Count, I couldn't possibly. . . '

Instantaneous thoughts raced around his brain. Delay! Delay! Get those idiots killed and worry about it later. Why hadn't he had them executed when Chapter Five

71

they first arrived? Or even better, when they were in the act of arriving?

What would the execs say? Bloody Peck.

Peck!

'Couldn't possibly. . . ' he stammered, 'I'll have to get my man Peck to take a look at this. Can't have any old piece of paper arriving. Who knows where it could have come from?'

The Count sat back and took a pull on his disgusting cigar. 'Mr Peck has already countersigned the directive.' Absently, he twisted the document around so Marius couldn't avoid looking at it.

Marius suddenly felt in the grip of something. . . nasty. Something powerful and faceless and inhumane and very, very bureaucratic. He realised what it was he loved most about being the Governor of Selonart. They left you alone. Until now.

'Count. Just what is going on here?'

The Count inhaled deeply. He nodded, perhaps to himself. 'All right, Governor. The time has come. The Doctor is a man for whom I have been waiting.'

For whom? The pedantic grammar stuck in Marius' mind. What century was De Vries living in?

'I suspect that you suspect that this regatta is not going to proceed as effortlessly as those of previous years. You are correct. Someone is

trying to sabotage the race. There is, to be melodramatic, a plot.'

Marius thumped his hand on the table. The cafetiere, the mugs, the spoons, rattled most satisfactorily.

'I knew it!' He yelled. 'Someone wants me out of the way!'

'No, no. Nothing like that.'

'Ah.'

'Much worse.'

'Ah!'

De Vries stood up and looked out over Beta Marina. He seemed to be considering his words carefully. 'The Doctor and I are pursuing the same man. A very dangerous man. Inconceivably dangerous for you, me and the whole of the Imperium.'

At last Marius understood. He pointed an accusing finger, not realising he was rising from his chair 'You! You're some kind of agent. From Earth!'

De Vries turned. He flicked the cigar over the balcony. 'Whatever you say, Governor.'

Chapter Five

72

'Who is this man? Is he here, on Selonart?'

'Oh yes,' nodded the Count. 'Somewhere, lost amongst the tourists. Only the Doctor will know him. He has come to Selonart for the hunt. He is running his own kind of race, if you like.'

Marius chewed on his rouged fingernails. 'And the others?'

At last, the Count seemed puzzled. 'Others?'

'The girl and the boy. And the Blockhead.'

'Blockhead? Ah, Bloom. The Doctor's friends, you must release. Bloom, you may dispose of as you wish. He is of no importance. Execute him if you must execute somebody. But the Doctor must not be harmed. I have rented an office on one of the floating parks. The

Doctor and his friends must be brought to me there. Immediately. Do you understand, Governor?’

Marius barely heard the words. He was too busy thinking.

‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes, yes. Tell me one thing, Count.’

‘Mm?’

‘Who is this saboteur? This enemy?’

De Vries looked out over the balcony once more, as if trying to pick out his opponent from the milling ant farm of people down below. ‘His name?’ he replied after a pause. ‘His name is Sabbath.’

Sabbath. Marius nodded sagely. He would remember that name. Now it wasn’t his fault and he’d done nothing that he could be blamed for, there was something exciting and daring about this whole business.

A buzz from his comms unit. Marius jumped, then snatched it from the table. ‘Yes?’

‘Governor!’ sparked a voice. ‘It’s the prisoners, sir. They’ve escaped.’

Marius looked up to meet the Count’s unblinking gaze. His face, despite the political makeup now daubed on it, was utterly colourless.

I sometimes think the Doctor likes to escape from places simply because he is bored. It would explain a lot: the interminable running around we have to do, the rushed goodbyes when we’ve saved the planet or beaten up the monsters and I’m ready to settle down and have a good old knees-up with the grateful survivors, not to mention his never being able to stay in one place for two minutes.

At any rate, something motivated him into unlocking the cell door and painlessly putting the guards out of action.

Chapter Five

73

We could only watch, like it was a film. When he was done, he turned to us and winked.

Fitz looked at me. ‘Now he does it. You couldn’t leave it any later

could you?’

‘Are you sure about this?’ asked the Doctor, suddenly. ‘This is a very small rock. Where can we go?’

‘Doctor, we’re wasting time,’ Fitz snapped. ‘They’re bound to know you’ve got the door open.’

I was itching to get out. I would have said dying but that was what we were trying to avoid. And all the time it was getting lighter. ‘Can we talk about this later?’

He shrugged. ‘Oh well. . . ’

In the end I shoved my way past him. I’d had enough of his riddles. I’d also had enough of being locked up. And parallel universes and the TARDIS

gone west and all the rest of it. I just wanted out. Fitz was right behind me.

Everything was fine until we had to go back to get Bloom. What does it take to notice a prison break when you see one? That guy lived in a world of his own. He loped along beside us and all the time I thought about how light it was and how long we were taking just getting to the lifts.

Lifts. Now, I’m not too wild about escaping in lifts. I mean, they’re not exactly hard to disable are they? At least you can’t turn the power off on stairs.

Once we were all inside I jabbed the most downward looking button I could find. Immediately, the doors slammed shut and my stomach did that flop thing that all stomachs do in rapidly descending boxes.

Then there was nothing to do but wait, whilst the muzak diddled-daddled through the speakers. It was almost funny. Here we were, all red-faced and nervous and jumpy and that and all we could do was stand not-talking like a bunch of shoppers in Harrods. Slowly, oh ever so slowly, the digital digits did their countdown thing.

‘I don’t want to say “this is too easy”,’ said Fitz. ‘Stop me saying it.’

‘Don’t say it,’ I warned. ‘I would be forced to harm you.’

The lift pinged and we bumped. Again like in a film, we instinctively

flattened ourselves against the walls. ‘We get out, head for a fast looking boat, get it started, go find the TARDIS,’ Fitz jabbered.

The Doctor, who had waited patiently throughout our whole silent descent, shook his head. ‘Easy as that, eh Fitz?’

Chapter Five

74

Finally, the doors swooshed open. We were in some kind of reception. A gaggle of clerical types were waiting outside the lift, all dressed up ready for work. Already bored. The only thing that seemed to bother them about us was that we didn’t get out of the lift quick enough. ‘In your own time,’

muttered one grey-uniformed wag.

‘Morning,’ said the Doctor, ushering us out. We left a wake of polite, reluctant murmurings in our wake. The few heads that were awake seemed very surprised to see Bloom with us. He and Fitz were too excited, nipping ahead of me and the Doctor, chittering like monkeys.

As we ‘escaped’, I spotted the inevitable grey-haired, uniformed old codger dozing behind a vast panel of CCTV screens. I couldn’t believe we hadn’t been spotted yet. Seeing as how our plan consisted of walking out through the front door in broad daylight, their security certainly needed some tightening up.

Then again, with the Doctor looking all authoritative and serious up front I doubt anybody had the nerve. I put on my best office bitch face and dared anyone to halt our progress. Only the fact that my hands were shaking like landed fish betrayed the fact that I was one inch away from screaming.

Through the large plate windows I could see the little enclosed Marina we had been brought into. Chinks of summery light stabbed down on to the gently bobbing, official-looking boats tied up at the side. For some reason I thought of Brighton Marina. Was there an Asda here?

Fitz and Bloom waited patiently for a couple of secretaries to walk in through the revolving door and made their way outside. I looked at the Doctor.

As I put my hand on the already moving door I started, fatally, to think we might have made it. Which was when the door stopped

turning.

Which was when the klaxons went off. Which was when all hell broke loose.

'I'm so glad you are undamaged,' fussed the Governor. 'I would be mortified to think you might have come to some harm in the confusion.'

'Prior to our being executed, you mean,' replied the Doctor, sipping his tea.

I sat back in the over-padded chair, still raging. I didn't trust myself to say anything to this fool. He looked like an Australian juggler in Covent Garden.

You just wanted to punch him.

'Oh come come, Doctor. And the lovely lady of course. A simple error that Chapter Five

75

we will do everything in our power to rectify.' The insincerity dripped off him.

'And Bloom?'

The Governor's face darkened. I could sense his rage, and the fear behind the rouge. But he was good at his job and kept smiling. 'I am afraid my instructions are quite clear. He has been considered guilty and, regrettably, sentence is still to be carried out. Not my doing, you understand. Orders from an authority much higher than mine.'

And then, inexplicably, he winked at the Doctor. There's a lot of winking going on round here, I thought to myself.

'He is quite innocent, you know,' I snapped. 'He didn't kill anyone on that yacht.'

The Governor folded his arms. 'I am afraid the whole matter has passed out of my humble hands. Now, I can't stay long. I must address the race sponsors. There's a mountain of paperwork and for the first time ever my chief administrator seems to have problems getting out of bed.'

'How inconvenient for you. Excuse me.' I couldn't keep the disgust out

of my voice. I wanted some fresh air.

I looked out over Beta Marina. The Governor certainly had a cushy job here. The view was stunning. I walked out on to the balcony and caught a whiff of something like tobacco smoke on the way. Don't tell me the Governor was in the habit of slipping out for a crafty one.

As the Doctor and the fool talked, I stared out at the bright sea. What were we doing here? I felt homesick again, really bad. We were no nearer to finding Sabbath, no nearer to finding anything, not even the TARDIS. Now we'd lost Fitz.

I didn't want to think about that dream I'd had but it kept coming back to me. Reality, splitting apart, dividing. We were slipping into mirrors, row after row of them, each one deflecting us further away from the place where we started out.

I thought about Sabbath; I thought about how the dream might end. Perhaps there was no way back to the beginning. Perhaps everything I knew would never be the same again.

I don't know, I'm not someone given to it but just then I felt frightened.

Transitory, a mere moment in someone else's life. It wasn't a question of zipping around like the three musketeers; having fun playing with different universes. Oh it wasn't just now, with all this. I'd felt it before, perhaps Chapter Five

76

everyone does, but the thought that there was no going back brought it all to the surface. The change had done something to me, deep inside. I felt like *I* was a parallel, nearly the same but not quite. I was tired. Memories of my life were going, disappearing. Even days I thought I'd never forget were going, becoming nothing more than colours or flavours. I wasn't who I had been. There had to be a point of rest, a way-station where I could, I don't know, collect everything together and rummage.

Somehow I didn't think there was going to be.

Anji, Anji, I chided myself. This isn't getting you anywhere. Better to worry about Fitz and Bloom than brood. It was indulgence, that's all. Lazy indulgence; for heaven's sake I wasn't sixteen any more. Next thing I knew I'd be writing frightening verse to a buck-toothed girl in

Luxembourg.

No. There was plenty more to do whatever parallel universe you ended up in.

I gripped the balcony handrails hard to bring myself back to the present and then turned back to find out what it was the Doctor and his new chum had decided.

‘We’ve been summoned,’ said the Doctor chirpily, rising from his comfy seat.

‘Huh?’ I managed.

‘Our ally is waiting for us.’

‘Between you, me and the jetty,’ the Governor tapped his nose cheekily.

How tiresome. Amongst his other delusions the Governor clearly fancied himself a ladies’ man.

Once again, we were bucked about in the blacked-out hovercraft. This was my overriding sensory input from this paradise planet: blackness. Either night, cells or hovercraft. Well, as far as I was concerned Colliers Wood on a Saturday afternoon was better looking.

I wasn’t quite sure why we were travelling again. I was exasperated by what seemed to me a total lack of any progress. I felt I hadn’t slept for about two years but even now it wasn’t coming. I knew this was making me short-tempered and that wouldn’t help anyone. ‘Tell me, Doctor,’ I asked, ‘what’s going on? I mean, we haven’t learned a thing.’

The Doctor was looking down at his knees. I took this to mean he was thinking. ‘On the contrary Anji. I’ve learned a great deal and I’m very, very worried.’

Chapter Five

77

‘Such as what?’

‘Think about it.’

‘The race?’

‘Possibly.’

‘How come this Count de Vries knew who we were and why we were coming? I didn’t like to think that I might know the answer to that one. Do you think he’s really –’

He put a ringed finger to my lips. ‘Shh. Hovercraft skirts have ears. We will know soon enough.’ He sat back again, returning to staring at his knees.

‘Think back. We were tempted here by that model ship.’

‘Junk mail.’

‘I don’t think so. I think more that it was an invitation. If *he* is here, I think he needs our help. Perhaps he’s just shy.’

‘Doctor!’ I snapped. ‘He’s. . . he’s evil!'

‘No Anji.’ The Doctor was inscrutable as he stared at me. ‘Amoral, ruthless, utterly egocentric in his indifference to human suffering but not evil. He believes he is doing good. I think he sees himself as a crusader.’

‘Whatever. That still makes him an arse.’

‘Underestimate him at your peril. And crude insults merely highlight your lack of vocabulary.’

‘What? What are you, my teacher?’

The Doctor put his arms behind his head. ‘Yes. If you like, Anji, yes I am.’

‘So teach me. Why is someone blowing up yachts? You think he wants to win the race?’

‘You’re looking in the wrong place, Anji. Someone isn’t blowing up yachts.’

‘Yes they are.’

‘Don’t interrupt, I’ll lose my train of. . . train of. . . ’

‘Thoughts?’

‘Exactly.’

I tried to look him straight in the eye this time. ‘Here we go then. You can’t phone a friend, you’ve done fifty-fifty and you’ve asked the audience.

You want to play?’

He smiled. Sometimes being banal worked on him. That and the fact he didn’t have a clue what I was talking about.

‘Fire away.’

‘All right,’ I said. ‘It’s not about the race. I guess it’s about the water. What about the water?’

Chapter Five

78

Suddenly his face altered. The humour always there behind his eyes had suddenly been harshly suppressed. ‘What about the water,’ he repeated, deadly serious, not a question. ‘I think someone is blowing up yachts in order to change the water. To alter the water, or release something in the water. To create those crystal formations Bloom was so enraptured by.’

‘Why?’

The engines screamed as the hovercraft went into deceleration mode. We were. . . wherever it was we were going.

I stood up too early and toppled as the vehicle wobbled unsteadily. When you can’t see anything it makes it impossible to balance yourself. Oh, artificial gravity! What a wonder!

The Doctor just sat, comfortable and smug. ‘I presume we are about to find out.’

Chapter Six

Hi folks. Fitz here again.

Call me stupid, call me a big kid but from the moment the Doctor got us out of that cell I started to enjoy myself. It was action, you see, it was movement and I’ll take that over all the planning and cogitating any day.

Thinking? I mean, that’s what the Doctor and Anji are for.

At any rate, once the chase was on I felt great. The revolving door into the reception jammed tight, the bells went off and I imagined I could already hear those guards' boots thumping after us. Anji looked at me through the glass and her face told me there was no way out for them. The Doctor waved me away. He wanted us to get going. Maybe he wanted me to keep an eye on Bloom.

I didn't know where the hell I was. An enclosed mini-harbour full of folk on their way to work on a bright sunny morning isn't exactly a head start. I was already looking round for routes out. The framework around the harbour looked climbable but we'd be easy targets for any young and trigger-happy guards. That's the problem with kids these days: they're all muscle and no brain.

I could see my original brilliant plan to nab a boat and smash our way out was, well I admit it, a little naive. I was willing to have a go but the whole process of getting on a boat, working out how to turn the engines on, casting off, wheeling round, hoping the doors to the sea would miraculously just open for us. . . well, OK. It wasn't really that feasible.

Mind you, the thought of running around for a minute or so up and down the concrete apron then sticking my hands up was too embarrassing to contemplate. I was going to have to do something. Or Bloom was.

And he did.

There was a flash of blue light and, indeed, the sound of running boots.

A voice shouted 'Stop!' and the commuters ran like monkeys. A couple of sleek, white golf cart things equipped with blues and twos were trundling towards us. It's OK, you can laugh. I did. Until the first bullet whipped past 79

Chapter Six

80

my face.

'Why you –' I bellowed, and then Bloom grabbed me and hauled me over the concrete and into the oil-stained water.

He could have warned me. You know, I might have had time to take a

deep breath and that. As it was, I found myself upside down underwater and gulping down a lungful of rancid salt water. Bloom still had hold of my coat.

So I thumped him. Air first, escape later. Stars filled my vision and it took all my energy to avoid throwing up.

Then we were up and I spat the cack out of my lungs. Through a film of tears I saw the cops racing to the jetty edge, guns raised.

Bloom erupted from the water beside me. Water streamed from his lank hair. ‘Fitz! We go! We go!’

I nodded and he yanked me under again.

Now Bloom may not have been much on land but under water he was a genius. He reminded me of a seal: big and bulky and clumsy out of his element but down here, well, a gymnast.

Essentially all I had to do was hold my breath. Bloom dragged me along in his slipstream at what felt like an incredible speed. It couldn’t just be the water that did this, surely? I opened my eyes, looked up and saw the bottoms of boats shuffling past like blocks on a conveyer belt. I craned my neck and saw his plan. The gates out into the main Marina only went under a few feet.

And then we were up. I felt like I’d been under for half an hour but strangely enough I wasn’t that out of breath. We broke the surface and I shook the water off my head. We were in the middle of a Larger rectangular harbour. Much larger. There were boats everywhere.

Beyond the water was a crushed holiday resort. Crushed in the sense that all the available space had been filled with hotels, bars, tacky shops, high-diving boards, the works. A hundred different pop songs rang round my ears.

And people. There were people everywhere: tourists, street traders, boaters, waiters, kids, the whole kaboodle. None of whom, thankfully, seemed interested in us.

Bloom and I hauled ourselves up a rusty iron ladder pinned into the shaped rock at the far edge of the Marina. As far away from the government com-pound as we could get.

‘Morning!’ bellowed a hale-looking grey-haired old sailor busy tying knots (or whatever it is they do) on the bobbing yacht next to us; as if

everybody went swimming in their clothes at this time in the morning.
He even had a Chapter Six

81

pipe in his mouth and a blue cap with requisite gold anchor on his head. I smiled weakly back.

Behind us and through the mêlée I could see the flashing blue lights of the stalled police golf carts. This was a highway of sorts but so thick with people it would take the cops a week to reach us. Bloom grabbed my hand and we pushed through the crowd towards a set of steep brown steps leading into the bulk of the town.

I think this was the first time I really realised what kind of planet I was on. At last I had a chance to look around. The higher we climbed, the more I had the feeling that Selonart was like an exaggerated, cartoon version of a Spanish holiday resort. The buildings shared that white, sun-bleached architecture. The smell of food sizzling in the open air was the same, the bustle, the bright light. The sandals and suntan lotion. Even though we were being chased I thought to myself: there are worse places to have an adventure in.

The only difference, and it was quite a big difference really, was this huge chimney of rock which stretched up into the sky, must have been about, well. . . it was pretty tall, I can tell you. A giant cylinder of stone. That was where we had been captured and held, in a cluster of government buildings that looked like they had been nailed to the chimney sides.

So this was one of the land masses of Selonart.

Pretty cool.

The town itself was built round a curl of rock that created a natural harbour; extended by concrete and metal. The hotels, the bars, the restaurants, the shops were little more than limpets clamped to a mass of rock at the chimney's base. All in all, Beta Marina was probably less than five miles wide.

There could be no natural resources here. Everything from water upwards would have to be imported. A high maintenance spoiled wife of a colony.

As Bloom and I climbed even higher (sweating now; my clothes were steaming as the water went *szzzz!* out of them) I really started to get a

glimpse of the scale of Selonart. Everywhere, apart from this little speck, was water. A broad circle of bright water out to the distant horizon. I don't know why but the immensity of that ocean, the unbroken distances, really made me feel, I don't know, strange. It would be a claustrophobic life here despite the space, trapped on this little speck of rock.

Squatting like white sea birds on that water, about three miles out, were Chapter Six

82

the racing yachts. Now when I say yachts, I don't want you to think they were anything like those little bobbers we'd swum past in the Marina. No, these were thoroughbreds; gigantic, pristine and aloof. They radiated a smug sense of their own superiority. It was only now that I was able to look them tethered there, gleaming in the sun, that I realised just how big and impressive they actually were. Hadn't got any of that when we'd been on one.

Beautiful, beautiful craftsmanship.

No doubt you can deduce what my first thought was at the sight of them.

It was what yours or anyone's would have been. Yeah, it was this: I want a go.

Bloom pulled me sideways into a narrow street canopied by decorated banners. The wind-blown canvas gave us some shadows to work from. We were still nudging and pushing past people and I was starting to think now that this was a little more exotic than Magaluf in my comparison list, because everyone we bumped into had the healthy, superior, bluff, pampered appearance of the very rich. You could tell because when you knocked into them they lost their temper. Which made me laugh. This wasn't a resort for the lager lout, the secretary out for a bit of a giggle.

At last we stopped for breath, and I realised how tired I actually was. I panted and sobbed and heaved, leaning on Bloom. My thighs were killing me after that long climb up the steps and in the heat I knew my face was red enough to have seriously worried any passing paramedics.

After an hour or so, maybe less but it certainly felt that long, the world returned to full colour again and I found the strength to look at

Bloom.

Incredibly, he looked completely unfazed by our exercise. One fit guy.

‘What now?’ I asked, trying to force the words out through cracked lips.

‘I know a safe place,’ he replied. ‘No one come there. You ready?’

I nodded. One more push.

It didn’t really help that as soon as we turned the corner out into the next street we ran slap bang into two strolling policemen. They were as surprised as we were.

For a moment we stared at each other. I saw my dumb, unbelieving face reflected in their respective cop-sunglasses. They looked so stern and stupid, with their moustaches and badge-filled shirts, that I couldn’t help a smile.

I think that was what did it. If there’s anything a cop hates, it’s not being treated seriously. Simultaneously, the pair reached for their holsters.

‘Aaaarrrrgggghhhh! ! ! ! !’ I yelled and ran at them. Pure instinct you Chapter Six

83

understand. I didn’t know what I was doing either. Hoping Bloom would follow, I piled into the policemen and sent them sprawling.

Without giving anybody a chance to do anything, especially anything that involved bullets, I pelted up the narrow street. I thought we were doing well until I heard Bloom yell, ‘Not that way! Not that way!’ and, unable to stop myself, slid round a corner and found myself staring at a blank wall. A waiter, the shape of his head giving away his nativeness, was leaning against a closed metal door, dragging on a crafty fag. He looked terrified, not surprising really; I guess I looked pretty wild. The cigarette fell from his fingers.

‘Stop or we shoot!’ barked a stern and unmistakeably authoritarian voice.

I did so, raising my hands. The Selonart waiter raised his.

‘What did I do?’ he asked in a frightened whisper. ‘Bloom?’

'Don't worry,' said Bloom from behind me. 'Us they want.'

I didn't know how we were going to get out of this one.

As it happened, I didn't need to get out of it. Someone rescued us.

We heard a couple of thumps and the rattle of guns dropping on to the cobblestones. I looked at the waiter, as he was facing the right way.

'Someone stun them,' he said, nodding his head a little too quickly.
'Can I go now?'

'I think so,' I replied. 'Thanks for your help.'

'No problem. You in the trouble, Bloom?'

'Nah. 'S OK now.'

He thought for a moment, studying us. Then the waiter pulled back the bolts on the metal door and hopped inside, slamming it behind him.

'Nice feller,' I said.

'Yeah.'

We turned.

The two cops were indeed splayed out on the floor. Standing beside them was a woman holding a rather sinister looking stun-type weapon at us. She had short blonde hair and was dressed in a very simple red tracksuit; a bit shapeless and not very becoming. Which was a shame because underneath she seemed. . .

'Good morning gentlemen,' she said, interrupting my train of thought.
'Mr Bloom. If you would like to accompany me. I have somewhere quiet where we may put you for a little while.'

I looked at Bloom, he looked at me. We shrugged. 'OK,' we said together.

Chapter Six

Of course, when you're in the line of business that I'm in, you should never get your hopes up. You see, when I said we'd been rescued what

I should have said was that we'd been press-ganged.

Yes, young Fitzy here. Coshed and taking the king's shilling like some eighteenth-century Plymouth drunkard. Out of the frying pan and into . . .

well, I've made my point.

We believed the woman, Valeria she told us to call her, right up to the moment she bundled us on to the little speedboat. It was moored behind one of the bars on the far side of Beta Marina. It was then, sitting in the thing, watching another red tracksuit (a man this time) flick the engine on and throw off the ropes that I noticed a new gun, not a stun gun, was trained on us.

I thought about leaping out into the sea but had to admit to myself I was too tired to be bothered. Where could I go then? On Beta Marina I was late for my own execution. Wherever Valeria was taking us couldn't be worse than that. Also, presuming the Doctor and Anji had been recaptured they would now . . .

I'd forgotten them. They would now be about to die.

'Bloom, we've got to get back,' I stated flatly.

'Nobody is going back,' said Valeria. 'You are now property of the Bronstein People's Union.'

'The what?'

'Under Article Seventeen of the Selonart Constitution, you are invited *mou-jiks* of the vessel *Potempkin*. You will conform to all the rights and responsibilities contained therein. A manual of legal code of conduct will be provided to appraise you of your duties under Planetary Law should you be unfamiliar.'

'You mean, you're kidnapping us and we're supposed to be grateful? You can't do that!'

'They can,' said Bloom, mournfully.

'We are.' The woman smiled and I saw she couldn't have been more than eighteen. A vicious little teenager. 'Unless of course, you would prefer me to escort you back to the government authorities?'

And that was that.

It appeared that we were famous within the racing community. Within minutes of our escape being put out over the police band, half the crews in the Chapter Six

85

race were out in Beta Marina looking for us. It was just our rotten luck that this lot found us first.

I must confess I'm being a bighead when I say 'us'. I mean: Bloom. As far as I could tell I was just along for ballast. The Selonart equivalent of a galley slave.

Bloom was a bit of a celebrity here. You wouldn't have guessed it, not to look at him, but he was. I would never have guessed.

When we were brought aboard the *Potempkin*, which I have to say was the dullest vessel I have ever been brought at gunpoint on to, they all crowded round Bloom as if he was from outer space. Which, to look at him, you may have suspected yourself. Which, actually, was true. He was from... oh, forget it.

This was an odd crew. The same red tracksuits, the same stern expressions, the same coldness. They struck me as if they were trying to be clones, trying to be as similar to each other as they could. They blended in perfectly with the surroundings: humourless, Spartan and efficient.

I was getting pretty frantic now about the Doctor and Anji. I had to keep telling myself they would be OK, because there was no way I could see how to get out of here.

We were marched into a cabin and manacled down. Valeria watched, seemingly finding our predicament amusing. After a while, maybe half an hour or so, the Captain turned up, to 'speak' to us. Captain Levin.

He was a big bulky man in his fifties, with the same red tracksuit. Only a flash of gold piping on his shoulders gave away his rank. If there had been a *joie de vivre* gene in his body it had shrivelled up and died long ago.

His first words weren't encouraging. He looked at me but spoke to Valeria.

'Why is this one alive? Your orders were only to pick up the native.'

Valeria was unfazed by his harsh words. ‘It seemed convenient. So far in this race, Comrade Captain, you have shot three crewmen. I thought he might make up the numbers.’

Levin turned on her. ‘You are not paid to think. Dispose of him. Or I will dispose of you.’

Valeria shrugged. She unclipped her pistol. ‘Very well.’ She pointed the gun at me.

This was a shock, I have no hesitation in admitting. After all that trouble to bring me here I couldn’t believe she would just blow my head off. Seems I was wrong.

Chapter Six

86

‘Hang on a minute,’ I snapped, staring down at that big black hole. ‘You can’t do this. You need me.’

Valeria clicked back the safety. ‘You flatter yourself.’

I couldn’t think. Was this how it all ended for Fitz? No. No, it couldn’t.

Not after what I’d been through.

‘Stop!’ shouted Bloom.

‘Wait,’ said the Captain, raising an arm. ‘You have something to say, Mr Bloom?’

I couldn’t look at Bloom, I couldn’t look at anything except that barrel, held perfectly still in Valeria’s steady hand.

‘Deal. . .’ said Bloom slowly. Too damn slow for my liking.

‘That’s right,’ I chipped in. ‘We can make a deal. I have friends. The Governor –’

‘Shut up!’ snapped the Captain. ‘No deals. He is of no importance. You will navigate for us.’

I heard Bloom rattle his manacles. ‘No. No I won’t. If Fitz die, Bloom not help. Swear you can kill me before I help.’

I was looking at Valeria. She wanted to fire, she really did. Not out of

any rancour; just sheer joy. The vixen.

‘If he dies we will get you to do what we want anyway,’ she said pleasantly.

‘Even a blockhead like you should understand that.’

‘Never!’ hissed Bloom and boy did he mean it. He wasn’t the same frightened mouse I’d known back in the Governor’s cell. His blood was up. ‘You kill Fitz and I die too. You will never use me.’

Valeria just looked straight at me, licking her lips. Guess she didn’t have much fun on this voyage. She wanted to call Bloom’s bluff. If indeed it was a bluff.

The Captain thought for a minute. A very long minute (and I’ve known some long minutes in my time).

‘Very well,’ he said unemotionally, as if he were deciding what colour shirt he wanted to buy. He waved Valeria away. Reluctantly, my executioner lowered her pistol, smiling all the time.

‘Stage Two of the race commences at dawn tomorrow,’ he said, as if briefing his crew. ‘This is the longest stage. There are eight yachts in the race.

Correction: seven. We are currently lying third. Listen now, Bloom. If our yacht falls any further behind I will have this man killed. If we do not complete this stage in pole position I will have this man killed. When the race is Chapter Six

87

completed, I will have him killed anyway. There is no deal. Do you understand me, Bloom?’

I could feel Bloom’s anger. His mouth was clenched tight. Veins traced lines on his face and arms.

‘DO YOU UNDERSTAND?’ the Captain bellowed. Instantly, he snapped his emotions shut.

‘Yes. Understand.’ Bloom lowered his big, angular head. ‘Yes, Captain.’

Levin allowed himself a tight smile. ‘Please. You are in a people’s democ-racy here. Comrade will be sufficient.’ He clicked his heels, the jumped up little fascist, and out the door he went.

'Don't worry, Fitz,' said Valeria. 'We will pick this up again.' She followed.

That night we just sat in our manacles listening to the sounds of the yacht being warmed up for the morning start.

You will find me here in some very low spirits. I was shivering. I couldn't help it. I know it will come as a surprise to you but old Fitz here was suffering from shock. Bear with me please, not only was I stuck in some parallel universe thing, I had also been attacked, imprisoned, threatened with execution (twice!), soaked and given some really bad food by these Bronstein people.

Add to that the fact I was convinced that short of a miracle the Doctor and Anji were dead. So you will hopefully find it in your hearts to forgive me. It was one of the worst nights of my life. I really couldn't see a way out.

Bloom on the other hand was quite calm. I had to admire his stamina, the way he could *endure* suffering.

Don't get me wrong, I was incredibly grateful to Bloom for saving my life.

Let's face it, the guy hardly knew me and we hadn't exactly gotten off to a flying start. However, he seemed to think that we'd saved *his* life on the other yacht and was returning the favour. I started to see just what a good friend this poor man could be.

To take my mind off my predicament, I'm not one for lying there and taking it, I quizzed him about the race and stuff. What did they want him for anyway?

He told me about how racing crews would harness the natives' affinity with the waters on this planet. The Selonarts could sense the currents, the ebbs and flows of the oceans quicker than any computer. Just dunk them in and they can give you an update on the fastest streams to follow. A little bit of an Chapter Six

edge that in a race this massive and competitive could prove the difference between winning and losing.

Seems it wasn't just him they used, any of these Selonart guys was fair game. In fact, the guards had been taunting us with the fact that this

yacht had already been using one for the first stage. When it became clear that the *Potempkin* was only going to end up third, this native was conveniently ‘lost overboard’. Sore losers. And not particularly up on their human rights.

‘You seem to be the real trump card,’ I said. ‘How’s that?’

Bloom seemed to be staring out into the darkness. He was thinking. Thinking real hard. He said, ‘They call me “Second Jen”. My parents “First Jen”, both born on Selonart from Earther gramps. But what they not know. I am Third Jen. As old as Second Jen but actually Third Jen.’

‘Third generation,’ I muttered. ‘So whatever this thing with the water is, you got a triple dose.’

‘Fitz,’ he said. ‘I cannot follow your words. To me, you speak rubbish.’

I smiled. ‘You wouldn’t be the first to say that. I mean, your affinity with the sea. Somehow, it grows stronger the further you go down the family line.

I take it you’re a rare bird.’

‘Bird?’

‘There aren’t many like you on Selonart.’

‘None. A few Second Jen. Perhaps fifty or so friends. But not all have the feeling. I have it the strongest, I think.’

Well, that was something. Nothing like being unique. ‘Wow,’ I said. ‘Must be great.’

He looked at me as if I was mad. ‘Great?’ he replied. For a moment I thought he had misunderstood again, but he hadn’t. ‘Sometimes feel Bloom lives half-life. Am prisoner in this life looking out of window. When in water, deep water, can feel the real life out there. The bigger life.’

He spoke with real feeling, real emotion. I remembered him from the lifeboat, when he described the crystal clusters under the water. The longing in him, the need. For a second I wondered just what he would do if he ever got the chance to get into this ‘bigger’ life? How far would he go? A man who clearly saw little value in what we would call normal life. He was big and lumpy, almost an attempt at a man

fashioned by some alien artist.

He moved his big square head in the dark. I listened to his hoarse breathing. Suddenly, he didn't seem human at all. Nothing near.

Chapter Six

89

How to explain? Bloom could not. Fitz ask the questions many before have done.

He feels the massive Bronstein yacht like a toy, stroked by the ocean beneath. A fragile metal cage; once again life keeps him away.

Bloom remembers the scientist Earthers from years gone. He, just a little Bloom, already different, already apart. He remembers his head on the pillow, the pain up his spine. Head too heavy. Only in water was head light, head free.

Scientist wanted to probe Bloom, to find out how. He recalls wires and machines on his head, in his brain, scurrying and searching. His Ma, watching in their tiny cottage. Frightened then. Wouldn't be frightened now; would laugh now. He sees his small self looking out through the open door, at the sea. Shouldn't be searching Bloom's brain for answers. Answers always out there, deep down. Under the ocean.

Scientist got bored in the end. Maybe there was more than one scientist.

Whatever, they all got bored when they couldn't unlock Bloom's brain.

And the rest was wandering the islands. Mooching. Playing waiter to Earther visitors. Helping in the races, before Earthers suss how useful Blockheads are to them. Bored. Bored and dry and pacing and waiting for something he never knew.

He felt like a fish in an aquarium Bloom saw once on TV. Only Bloom outside the water, unable to get in. Days and days and weeks and years of wandering, of sailing the dinghies. Sometimes with other kids, sometimes with Whalen but mostly alone. Weeks out in the currents.

Folks, they got worried about Bloom, worried he be lost in the storms.

Funny too, Bloom never get lost in a storm. How could he?

Ma show little Bloom. That first time; when he was real tiny. She took him down to the water's edge on Alpha, that little cove. He remembers the patterns the waves made on the rock. He remembers the breeze on his skin.

Ma, she drop her big fingers into the cool transparent water and looks out to skyline. 'Feel that, Bloom,' she says. 'Feel the ocean.'

And she grabs little Bloom's hand and pushes it under. He saw the way the pink digits went white under the liquid, the way the sea distorted them and made them wobble. And more: the shock, like he'd plugged in. He pulled his hand back. So powerful, so much. But Ma take hand again and tell little Bloom not to be afraid but to be happy and push his hand in once more.

This time he could feel the ocean breathe. The currents, deep down and Chapter Six

90

far away, their movements, their mysterious motives and arcane patterns.

And he felt, he felt it for the first time, that thing been locked inside, that big energy he'd always known was there. He felt this join with the big thing.

With the ocean. First time he felt more than Bloom. First time he felt home.

Where is Ma? What happened to her?

Oh, she died. Natives not live long. Short lives. Earthers say it's in the genes, something twisted in there that can't be taken out. But Bloom know more. Ma go because she wanted to. Felt there was something more waiting for her. Knew it. This Earther world just a part, like chewing first part of eating. One day, Bloom see her again. He knows it.

At last, Beta Marina was quiet. A few bars stayed open round the clock for serious business but most of the temporary population had more important matters to attend to than simple hedonism. The race was on again and there was money to be made.

Stage Two. The longest and most arduous stage. Nearly a month of racing without sight of land. This was where the mettle would be tested for the most ardent of yacht designers. Not only speed but endurance. And all this with the most cutting edge and experimental of engines.

The health and safety engineers had worked round the clock since Stage One had terminated; checking and re-checking every nut and bolt, every plasma unit and integrated surge field. A repeat of the MikronCorps accident could not be permitted.

Constable Jas Leimann of the Selonart Civilian Militia found himself wondering just what had happened to that yacht. There were rumours, speculation and downright gossip going round Beta Marina. Especially after this morning's excitement when the survivors had led them all a merry dance around the atoll and left two officers unconscious in the street. Since then, Leimann and his colleagues had covered every centimetre of the place looking for them. They were not there.

Some of the men were saying they were dead, that the whole affair was one big conspiracy, something to do with the big Corps desperate to put their rivals out of the picture. Easy enough to do, all you had to do was tip the bodies in the sea.

Being a practical man, Leimann's own theory was that whatever Corp was paying these saboteurs (if that was in fact what they ended up being), it would be simpler to get them holed up here in one of the boats, ready to Chapter Six

91

shuttle them off the planet. Of course, being Corps boats they had diplomatic immunity coming out of their ears. Logical, wasn't it?

And as for conspiracies, he had his own theory on that too. This was it: they would never know.

Leimann looked past the boats, out over the black shining water and shivered. He recalled getting the posting to Selonart. Thought he'd like being assigned here, thought he'd like patrolling the water's edge for a year. Almost a holiday, that was what he had thought.

Now he wouldn't care if he never saw water again. You could have too much of a good thing. There was something just too immense about this ocean. Certainly the knowledge that the next little spit of land

was eight thousand kilometres away gave him the freeze. There was nowhere to go if it all went wrong. They would be marooned.

He'd request an early transfer, get himself back into space. Bit of shipboard security – searching old ladies for drugs and beating up illegals – yeah, that would suit him.

Anything but this water, this endless water.

There was something in the water.

He stopped and shone his torch. It looked like a log or something.

Oh hell, Leimann thought, that's a body. Drifting to the concrete jetty. Why me? I don't want to get involved.

He squatted over the side, leaning against a silent bobbing boat, trying to get a clearer look. Definitely a body, one that had been dead a long time. So not our saboteur then. Could be a suicide, plenty of them when they run out of money.

The body nudged the stained Marina edge. It was face up and looked like the sea had really gone to work on it. Teeth gleaming in a lipless mouth, eyes stuck shut. Leimann felt sick. What was that smell?

He took a deep breath. Well, he wasn't going to pull it ashore. He'd report it in and request that transfer.

Leimann unclipped his belt-com and brought it to his mouth.

He never pressed the transmit button. The corpse had opened its dried eyelids. Before Leimann could cry out, two skeletal hands dug into the side of his head and dragged him down into the dark water.

Chapter Seven

As we watched the vast boats sidle by, I wondered if the Doctor was thinking about history. *I was.*

We were sitting on the roof of the floating business park watching the second stage begin. Sirens as loud as planets blasted across the open ocean.

In the distance, I saw the strange stone chimney of Beta Marina with its bolted on town. That basalt column was huge, like the stuck-out tongue of some ancient fossilised sea beast; straining to pierce the sky. Rockets and flares, little miniature flowers, blossomed briefly around

its trunk and fell away.

I fancied the Doctor was miffed. He liked to be the centre of attention but the focus of this planet was firmly on these regal vessels. We were in the background, the race going on without or even despite us. I didn't even know who was entered, let alone winning.

That was why I was thinking about history. And parallel histories. You think you have the big picture but really you have no idea of what's going on until it's all over and someone tells you it was historical. When you're in it you're just worrying about when you're going to eat, keeping your head down, and how do I sidestep this mess without getting killed? The actions you take; how are you supposed to know what significance they're going to have? You just do what you do.

Only when the parallel universe gets involved do you start to realise everything you do could determine everything else that you do. Which is when it all gets scary.

Like what we had discovered last night was scary.

'Look at that one,' said the Doctor. He pointed. Darting between the arrows of the larger yachts, a dapper polished shape was tearing up the ocean waves.

It looked about the size of a canoe compared to the others but I guess it would still have been a good fifty feet from bow to stern. What most caught the eye, however, was its colour. It was black, a thick impenetrable black.

Only a single emblem shone out from that black: a gold crest. Some shape 92

Chapter Seven

93

on it I couldn't make out.

'The enigmatic Count de Vries, no doubt.' He looked at me and for a moment I'd swear the Doctor looked tired. 'So it begins. The real race.'

An unnatural silence had fallen over the floating park when the last roar of the departing Governor's hovercraft had fragmented into echoes. The Doctor and I stood in the empty darkened dock in the middle of this metal doughnut.

‘No welcoming committee?’ the Doctor said, his words ringing round.

‘Come out, Count, wherever you are!’

‘What is this?’ I asked. Stupidly I suppose I had thought it was all going to make sense. No, we were back to wandering. I hadn’t seen enough of the place when we’d come here as prisoners to know my way around.

The Doctor nodded towards the main entrance.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘Once more unto the breach.’

He began striding ahead, as relaxed as if walking through a botanical gar-dens.

We made our way through the hatches into the air-conditioned lobby.

Looking around I had the thought that, despite humanity’s advances, in space all office buildings look the same, down to the rubberised pot plants by the lifts. I felt that I was going to bump into some decrepit, sallow-skinned night security gimmer; all ill-fitting serge and cheap novel. However, even that eternal truth wasn’t around.

‘What do we do now?’

The Doctor was inspecting one of those dot-matrix gizmos behind the deserted reception desk. Red letters flashed across our faces. ‘It appears someone has a sense of humour.’

I read the message, the letters running across left to right. ‘Sunday. . .

we. . . welcome. . . the. . . Doctor. . . and friends! . . . Conference. . . 1.
. . .’

Surreal.

We punched up ‘Conference 1’ on the little computerised map-mat on the desk and then hurried (in the Doctor’s case) or shuffled reluctantly (in mine) round the doughnut to the appropriate room. There was the usual glass pan-elling looking out across dark water to the lights of Beta Marina but at least it meant you could see there was nothing particularly homicidal inside. A large circular shiny table, chairs, jugs of water, a bubbling cafetiere (mmm!) and a big video screen on one wall.

The Doctor paused at the door. ‘Shall we?’

I need hardly tell you my instincts were warning me that this might not be a good idea. He pushed it open. The rubber seals hissed across the carpeting.

Cagily, feeling the old drying thing happening in my mouth, I tiptoed inside. ‘It’s a trap,’ I whispered.

‘Oh I don’t think so,’ the Doctor replied, looking up, down, everywhere. ‘I think –’

His words were drowned as another voice boomed out of the air at us. A voice I recognised. Sunday, indeed.

‘CONGRATULATIONS, DOCTOR!’

I froze solid, scared straight to hell. Sabbath.

‘I must compliment you,’ the voice continued.

How well I remembered those deep tones. He had a voice like brown coffee. ‘You really have come a long way to see me. Glad you could drop in.

Oh, and an equal welcome to you lovely Anji, and the daring Fitz. You don’t know how pleased I am you could join me for the race.’

It was a recording. A very lifelike one.

‘Keyed to activate on my voice,’ said the Doctor. ‘Clever.’

‘Can – Can he hear us?’ I asked. ‘Is he watching us?’

The voice boomed again, answering my question. ‘I regret I cannot be here in person to greet you. I trust you will understand I have a great deal to do, what with being a proud and most earnest competitor in this noble regatta.

However, we will meet soon. Very soon. I have an old friend with me, one I believe you met on the MikronCorps yacht and he is most keen to take up where he left off.’

‘Don’t worry, Anji,’ said the Doctor, abstractedly. ‘He’s just trying to scare us.’ It was so token an attempt to calm me down I nearly hit

him.

‘Oh really,’ I sneered instead. ‘Cos I’m thick, see. . . ’

‘There are great riches to be found here on Selonart, Doctor,’ the voice boomed again. ‘An infinity of possibilities. I regret only that I am forced into enlisting your aid. When you realise we have the same aim, you will beg to help. Find the key, Doctor, and you will find me. It’s a race but not the race you think it is. Good luck and I trust you wish me: BON VOYAGE!’

Then that unnatural silence again. I thought that Sabbath’s words were echoing round the conference room, then I realised they were all in my head.

‘Right, now we go,’ I said. ‘We’ve got him exactly where he wants us.’

‘On the contrary, my dear Anji,’ he replied almost gleefully. ‘Sabbath’s in trouble and he needs my help. So that’s why he made it so easy for us to Chapter Seven

95

follow him.’

‘How in the name of. . . whatever, did you work that one out?’

The Doctor tapped his head. ‘Simple psychology. He thinks he’s clever.

And he is. But not as clever as me. Ah ha!’

‘Well, that still leaves him at level three pretty clever. He’s got us here and all we’ve managed to do is get captured lots of times.’

Which is when the men with guns appeared and we got captured again.

No, it’s OK. I can hear you. Hear you sighing as you think: not again, how many times? One boat to another, cells, backwards and forwards all over the place. It’s wearing a bit thin, isn’t it?

Well, you’ll have to bear with me, I’m only telling you what happened.

Anyway, this time it wasn’t being captured, I just thought it was. It was being rescued. So, how’s that?

To be precise, being rescued by Major Marleen Kallison of the Imperial Security Service. That's "ISS" for those of you hard of remembering.

'We were wondering who was going to show up,' she said sternly, once we had got all the messy 'who are you and what are you doing here?' bits all sorted out. And at last I could help myself to a brew from the cafetiere. 'We were watching the installation of that sound equipment this morning.'

Oh she was very serious and straight to the point was this Major Kallison.

Never took her piercing blue eyes off us. 'Room booked out to Count de Vries,' she continued. 'Not surprisingly, he never turned up. Just a couple of TV technicians paid to prep and key the pre-set equipment. They didn't know anything.'

Well, I thought, feeling that brown nectar melt the fright out of my innards, she seems to know her job.

The Major was a very tall woman. Of that let there be no doubt. Over six foot. She towered over the Doctor, eyeing him suspiciously in her tall way.

She was probably descended from Scandinavian stock at some point; she had that thin blonde hair and previously mentioned blue eyes and a complexion that wasn't really made for the Selonart sun. Her men were alert around her and she didn't look the type to suffer fools gladly. I wondered what she'd make of the Doctor.

The other two guys were soldiers, in commando uniforms or whatever type of uniform it was. Black jumpsuits and webbing. Same old same old. They Chapter Seven

96

bustled around looking for clues. I had the feeling they didn't exactly trust us. Again, nothing new there.

'Does the Governor know you're here?' I asked the Major.

'That fool?'

'You've met him then.'

‘No,’ she smiled. ‘He does not know I am here and I would like to keep it that way.’

The Doctor asked, ‘What about this “Count de Vries”? Where is he?’

‘On board his yacht by now. We’re going to have him tracked by geo-sat throughout the race. In fact, when you’re ready you can come with us. We’ve got a long-range helijet to tail his boat.’

The Doctor pulled back a chair and sat staring out at Beta Marina. The night blanked out that giant chimney. He looked troubled.

‘Doctor?’ I asked. Sometimes he needed prompting. You know, when us poor saps could do with a bit of filling in.

‘Anji,’ he said, not looking back. ‘What does he want?’

‘Search me,’ I shrugged. ‘“Find the key and you will find me”. That’s what he said. Could have been a little more helpful. He’s playing games.’

‘He wants us to think he’s planned everything out. Make us despair. He’s wrong. A brilliant strategist with profound forward planning abilities, but he is not omnipotent. He didn’t bank on Fitz escaping for one thing. You know, I think we’ve been given enough clues. Major?’

Major Kallison looked up from her comms-link. ‘Stage Two begins in three hours. I want to be ready to ship out immediately. I don’t want anyone to know we were even here.’

‘Why are you following the Count? What has he done?’

Efficiently, as one would expect, the Major continued with her packing up business. She spoke without looking up. Obviously sharing information with civilians was not something she enjoyed doing. ‘Eight months ago the ISS

traced a starship leaving a restricted sector. A very restricted sector. The man we were following was a known smuggler, assassin and gun-runner.

The starship was found two months later registered to a company office on Proxima Centauri. A company owned covertly by De Vries. No ties of course, nothing tangible. Until someone did some checking on the man and his family.’

'And?'

Chapter Seven

97

'There is no family. All the paperwork, yes, going back centuries. An ancestral home on Mars where the money from the business network gets funnelled. But no actual people, just executors. The Count himself is apparently a recluse. I've seen similar operations; big corporations dabbling in fraud.'

Suddenly, he enters the race on Selonart. Someone got suspicious and sent me. After which we get an imperial submarine going missing, a sea monster and a yacht that "accidentally" blows itself up.'

The Doctor was staring intently out of the window 'But you don't have any actual evidence against the Count.'

Major Kallison nodded. 'No. Which is why we -'

At last the Doctor turned round. 'It all seems a lot of effort on your part. I mean, he hasn't actually done anything wrong. Why are you here? What is this sector he visited? It must be very, very off-limits to cause this much fuss.'

The Major just stared at him. She looked very grim. 'I'm sorry, Doctor. I can't tell you that.'

'I do hope you're going to say no to this. It's Demigest, isn't it.'

Major Kallison looked away.

Now, the Doctor does not turn pale very often. When he does, it's either because he's eaten kedgeree or he's very, very worried.

As no explanation had been forthcoming, I realised the Doctor was going to thoroughly sieve the information he had deduced before letting me in on it.

Rather than worry about it, I let him brood. Maybe I wouldn't want to know what he was going to tell me. I had a shower, ate some imported corporate apples and failed to get some much needed sleep.

In fact, it wasn't until we were up on the roof and the last racing yacht had powered up and revved off into the distance that he finally told me what he had meant by 'It's Demigest, isn't it.'

'I'm listening,' I said.

He was looking out to sea again. I fancied his mind was travelling out over those waves, out to another time, another place. 'You must understand, Anji, Demigest is. . . well, a story. A myth. Especially here, in this time.'

'A mythic solar system?'

He smiled. 'Not exactly. It's real enough. The legend goes that centuries ago, right at the dawn of Earth's interstellar expansion, one of their colony ships entered that system. It found a suitable planet and landed on it. The Chapter Seven

98

colonists awakened from their dreaming and wandered out to begin their initial surveys.'

'Don't tell me. They bumped into something nasty.'

'No one really knows. Subsequent satellite probes revealed nothing. Just an empty ship. Another lost colony.'

'Until. . . '

'Until a second expedition was sent. Remember, these were the days when humanity still had limited space travel. It was a costly and time-consuming job equipping a ship and sending it off. Especially when there was a good chance it might never come back again. Colonisation was a real lottery in those days. This was not a mission undertaken lightly.'

'What happened then?'

'The legend goes that one man did return from that mission. To a degree.'

'Eh?'

'They found his skeleton floating in an escape pod five years later. He'd starved to death. He must have known he couldn't survive long when he'd launched. He just needed to, had an overwhelming desire to. . . '

'Are you all right, Doctor?' I placed an arm on his shoulder.

‘Yes, yes,’ he replied. ‘Just thinking. That kind of devotion to duty. Quite, quite. . . rare in this day and age.’

‘What was his “overwhelming desire”? To escape?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, darkly. ‘To warn.’

There was a sound from behind us. I jumped, I really did. I don’t know why.

‘Very interesting, Doctor.’ It was Major Kallison. She clambered over the aerials to join us. ‘And highly classified. How do you know all this?’

The Doctor smiled, disarmingly. ‘Because I know things.’

‘You’ve read the “book”? The Major wasn’t angry, far from it. More kind of pitying. She squatted down beside us. ‘The ramblings of a lunatic. A frightened man who knew he was going to die.’

‘Perhaps. You still closed the system though. Wiped it from the memory of mankind.’

Kallison held out her hands. ‘You’ve got me there.’

‘Come on,’ I said.

‘You can’t leave me hanging.

What happened on

Demigest?’

‘The man, Trudeau, recorded an oral account,’ said the Doctor. ‘On the escape pod’s log. At some point the data was stolen and transcribed into a Chapter Seven

99

book. A secret book that got circulated around those in the know.’

‘*The Black Book of Demigest,*’ said Kallison in mock-Karloff. ‘Woo-ooo. . . ’

‘Very Monty Python. What did it say? You want to know how bored I was with playing the dutiful assistant? ‘Just tell me.’

'And in answer to your previous question, Major, no I didn't read the book,'

said the Doctor. 'I didn't need to. Perhaps a lot of it *was* ramblings. Trudeau must have been out of his mind at least some of the time. However, he was fighting his madness all the way. Certainly, his initial report was quite sane.'

He spoke of a planet of rocks. Rocks and mountains and barren plains. A strange wind that seemed to sing. A place that didn't seem quite of . . . of this universe. I personally believe he was more correct than he thought.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' scoffed Kallison, She obviously had her own theories. Very straight and practical ones.

'Demigest is, I believe, a primal planet. A place where Space and Time never truly established order. A stagnant pool full of primeval universal forces. Some concentration of power, of will almost, holding back the usual universal parameters.'

'Yeah, you're losing me now.' I am nothing if not honest.

'All right. How about this? Some elemental cancer, sentient perhaps, soaked into the bones of the planet.'

'Yes. No. Best just to go on with it. I'll catch up.'

The Doctor laughed. A reassuring sign. This was all getting too gloomy for my liking. 'So the colonists all died?'

'A cancer,' he continued. 'And no, they didn't die. Not all of them. You've met one of them, Anji.'

I remembered that dried up thing on the yacht. Its unstoppable, dead rage.

I'd been hoping it was gone, obliterated in the explosion. But experience taught me that nothing was that simple. 'That was a colonist?'

'Perhaps,' the Doctor replied. 'Once. Trudeau spoke of a kind of malady, an illness that affected his team. One by one they succumbed to it. An infection that dried their bodies out, altering them. Killing them. Those unaffected retreated into their ship and sealed themselves in.'

'Then how come this one's still. . . '

'His ship was visited. He speaks of dark figures in the night. Spectral men who came down from the mountain and walked in dust. Making patterns in the poisoned soil. Chanting in whispers. The cancer didn't kill everyone.'

Some survived but were. . . altered by its effects. Perhaps even, the cancer Chapter Seven

100

alone didn't kill all of the original colonists. Trudeau states that some of the bodies they found had been. . . well, that they had killed each other.'

'Speculation,' insisted Kallison. 'You can't know that.'

'Trudeau claims the spectral figures spoke to him. Asking him to come out; to join them. They sent pictures into his mind. And worse. They claimed they could help him defeat death itself. Could live forever. Which is when I believe his mind did snap.'

'Why? Immortality?'

'To live like that forever? These men weren't alive. They were the living dead, condemned to rot in eternity on this pestilent planet. Their minds had been fouled by the evil that hid there.'

'Evil? That's a bit strong, isn't it?' I didn't like the Doctor talking in such crude terms. It wasn't like him.

'I mean evil. Demigest took those that wanted to go. Those that embraced what it had to offer. And now they sit and stew in their caves, jealously hoarding their monstrously elongated half-lives, afraid and hating. You did right, Major, to blockade that system. Their pollution should never be allowed into the world of the living.'

'The Warlocks of Demigest,' said the Major ruefully. 'Do you really believe that, Doctor?'

The Doctor shook his head, seeming to be back here on Selonart for the first time since he'd started talking about this. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes I do. And if Sabbath has released them here then he is guilty of a monstrous crime.'

'Why?' I asked. 'Listen, Doctor. OK, it frightened me out of my knickers but all it did was run around and try to kill us.' Listen to me. All? What was I saying? 'What makes this Warlock different to anything else that regularly has the wish to see us dead?'

'Because Sabbath wouldn't have brought it here if that was all he wanted.'

He needs something from the Warlock, something else. I don't know, Anji.'

'And how come it didn't kill or absorb or whatever Sabbath? He obviously went there. How come they didn't take him?' I was babbling, I could hear myself. I just didn't want to believe it could get worse.

'I don't know!' The Doctor snapped, then instantly controlled himself. The smile appeared again. He licked his finger and held it up into the wind. 'I don't know. Sometimes I don't think Sabbath is a man at all. Not any more.'

He may have more in common with the Warlocks than with us. Perhaps he too is an unknowing puppet of primeval forces.'

Chapter Seven

101

Kallison leapt to her feet. 'Then we had better get after him. The helijet is ready to leave. Doctor?'

'Yes, Major. In a moment.'

I had one final straw to grasp on to. I had to say it. 'But it's dead, isn't it Doctor? The Warlock. It has to have died in the explosion.'

The Doctor chuckled. He knew what I was trying to do. The sod. 'What do you think, Anji?'

Back down at the jetty, a small boat waited for us, manned by the two eager soldiers. I didn't want to hear about this Demigest thing. It was too like the kind of nonsense that Dave used to spout; all that messianic sci-fi garbage. It may seem strange to you, I mean here I am living the life he used to dream of, but the reality of it always makes me think that somehow it isn't the same.

I still get blisters, and hungry, and stomach aches. Some days I look terrible and my hair's a mess and I'm more worried about that than whether the Gargons from Blaarg will overthrow their mad emperor robot.

Like I said before: history. That's the way it is. Not like the telly at all. I mean, I still had no idea what we were doing here, or why we had to find Sabbath and stop him. I didn't even know what that message he'd left for us meant.

Par for the course. But I had a feeling the Doctor did know; he'd hinted as much. I just wished he'd tell me. Just so I could put the whole affair in perspective. I felt so mixed up I didn't know what I wanted any more.

Well, there was only one way to find out. As we strolled along the jetty to the boat I trudged up to him. I was beginning to think I would have the stink of the sea in my nostrils forever.

'Doctor?' I asked, trying to sound as innocent and demure as I could.

'Mm?'

'What is going on? You might have all the clues but I'm none the wiser. If you let me in on it I wouldn't have to donkey round after you all the time. I might even be able to help.'

He stopped and looked at me. 'Of course. Sometimes I forget myself.'

He paused.

'Well?'

'All right. I think it's all tied in with those ice crystals we found. You remember how Fitz reacted strongly when he touched them.'

'He went off into a kind of daze. Nothing new there.'

Chapter Seven

102

The Doctor clasped my arm. 'It was the kind of daze he was in. He was badly hurt, perhaps it was just that, but I don't think so.'

'So?'

'So, perhaps whatever effect it had on him is the kind of effect that Sabbath wants to create.'

I tried to think back to that time in the lifeboat. It seemed such a long time ago. 'He said he was getting double vision. Not just vision. . . '

'Exactly. And Bloom seemed emotionally affected by the cluster he'd seen underwater. He has some form of telepathic communion with the elements of this planet. I rather think they were trying to tell him something.' I could almost hear the cogs and wheels in his brain whirring and clicking.

'These crystals aren't a natural phenomenon then?'

'No. Well, I don't know. A concentration, possibly. Perhaps Sabbath is trying to form them deliberately.'

'How?' It was starting to become clear to me but this last fact, this final piece refused to lie down and let me look at it.

'By blowing up nuclear racing yachts, amongst other things.'

'What other things?'

He turned back to where the Major and her men were sitting waiting impatiently for us. He clicked his fingers. 'Submarines!'

And with that, the lecture was over. I wasn't sure whether I'd learned anything or not. Still, it was a new kind of confusion to deal with.

I followed him to the little speedboat, thinking how nice and reassuring it was to have found the Major. Perhaps at last I could take a bit of a back seat.

After all, there didn't seem to be any immediate danger. I might even start worrying about my hair again. I might do that, like a proper girl.

I knew I shouldn't have allowed myself these comforting thoughts. Not with the Doctor there. When would I learn?

He turned round to face me and I knew I was doomed. 'Anji, I want you to do something for me,' he said, brooking no debate on the matter.

I sighed. 'Go on then.'

'I want you to wait here. The first shuttle boats will be bringing the

office workers here soon. I want you to go back to Beta Marina.'

'I see. Look, I want to stay with you.'

'I know,' he said. 'There's too much to do. I don't know what Sabbath's planning but I'm going to need all my energy to find out. I can't be in two places at once. Well, sometimes I can but not now.'

Chapter Seven

103

'You're just trying to keep me out of trouble, aren't you?'

'No no. I need you to do two things for me.' The Major was waving at us to get aboard. 'Number one: find Fitz. And Bloom if he's with him.'

'Oh, Doctor. Where am I going to. . . '

'You two!' Major Kallison was frantically looking at her watch. 'Come on!'

I don't want to lose that yacht. She nodded at one of her soldiers who flicked the engine into growling mode. The sound reflected her impatience.

The Doctor ran up to the boat, rubbed his chin and squatted down to face the Major. 'Anji is staying behind,' he said firmly. So that was it then. No protest. Like I would have made one. I knew I was going to do what he asked.

'Oh really?' replied the Major. 'What if I say no?'

'You won't,' said the Doctor, climbing aboard. 'You trust me. Also, I don't think we need to waste time looking for Count de Vries. When the time is right he'll come looking for us. I have something else in mind for us, Major.'

Much more important.'

'I don't understand.' Not surprisingly, Major Kallison didn't look too impressed.

'Join the club,' I snapped. Feminine support. You know, all sisters together.

Major Kallison didn't seem too impressed with that either.

'Doctor,' I said suddenly, and I couldn't keep the pleading out of my voice.

He just looked at me, reading me absolutely correctly. 'I know, Anji. This is where we must part. You'll be fine.'

I tried to nod.

He looked down at the Major. 'Right!' he said, slapping his hands together happily. 'Cast off, Captain!'

Kallison nodded and as one soldier threw off the rope, the other put his foot down. With a roar of energy and a bubble of foam, the speedboat pulled away from the jetty. Already I could see through the little hole to the outside sea the black blobs of commuter shuttleboats on their way for a day's work.

'Wait a minute!' I shouted to the disappearing Doctor. 'What about the second job?'

He waved at me and his voice echoed round the harbour. Do you know, I reckon he waited deliberately until he was out of range before he told me about job number two. Cheeky sod. You know what he said? He shouted,

'Oh, just convince the Governor to stop the race before Sabbath blows all the yachts up. Bye!'

Chapter Seven

104

I picked up an old rusty tin I saw lying on the ground and threw it after him anyway. It made me feel better.

It was only later, on yet another effing boat ride (it all seems so easy on the telly doesn't it? You can just cut to the next scene. In the real world there's all this *tiresome* travelling stuff to be got through) that I began to wonder whether the Doctor had an ulterior motive in casting me loose.

The workers had disembarked, surprised but incurious about this little Asian girl waiting for a boat back. They did what all white collars do when confronted with something they don't like: they ignored me.

After a lengthy argument with the native bus driver (thanks again,

Doctor, what about *money* then?) he grudgingly let me on board and off we went, back to Beta Marina.

As the little ferry ground its way across the still ocean, I was thinking about that message from Sabbath. I was thinking how much I hated the sound of his smug, fruity voice. It came to me. He had said: 'When you realise we have the same aim, you will beg to help.'

Could it be that the Doctor didn't want me around in case that was true?

Chapter Eight

Mikron Systems ComSat #451 was a pretty sophisticated piece of machinery Hell, its neural capacity probably exceeded the brainpower of a newborn baby. A state-of-the-art big thinking fantastically complex untiring fanatically loyal mechanical servant.

It wasn't sentient of course, don't think that. But if you looked at ComSat

#451 closely you might have thought that it did indeed possess one single personality trait. You would have looked at that gleaming metal ball with its LEDs and shiny aerials as it span round the blue planet and you would have decided it was insufferably smug.

Not that ComSat #451 had any opinion on your delusions of personification. Its mind was fixed firmly on its job and it never nodded off.

That job was to scan the planet Selonart for racing yachts and assess pre-vailing conditions. It was doing that job just fine.

Energy from that scan drilled down into the planet's stratosphere. It passed through the various layers of atmospheric density until finally it swept its electronic gaze across the imprints of eight tiny blips racing across the watery surface.

ComSat #451 had no idea of how much radiation it was passing into the water as it swept around the planet. Neither it nor its fellow thousand or so ComSat companions had the faintest interest in that fact, as they tiptoed round each other in their intricate dance of logic and pre-programming. They were faithful and efficient; slaves to the zillion or so gamblers, sponsors and spectators hooked on the race.

The satellite's wise fathers had decided that monitoring the radiation

was unimportant. That it didn't really matter how much the satellite or its colleagues blasted into those vast blue waters. They didn't care one way or the other.

Which was a shame really. Because there was someone on Selonart who knew exactly how much radiation the ComSats were pumping in. And he knew that it mattered a great deal.

105

Chapter Eight

106

That person was not Governor Marius.

We return to the Governor to find him much more relaxed than of late.

Now Stage Two was under way and all that business with the Doctor and Count de Vries was happening somewhere else, he had settled down into his real job. Which, of course, was keeping the race sponsors happy. Keeping the money happy.

Marius had a week before he was due to return to Alpha Marina. From now on, the race would look after itself.

He spent his days hosting receptions and parties, attending betting semi-nars, judging competitions and giving interviews. All the things he was good at. Hopefully, he tried to convince himself, all that other business would soon just be remembered as an exciting hiccup in the otherwise smooth running of the most triumphant and profitable race ever. A chance for him to emerge as a brilliant leader in a time of crisis. Which, considering the messages of congratulation coming in from Earth Central, appeared to be exactly what was happening.

Only the disappearance of Administrator Peck remained to nag away at his bland little brain. Most inconvenient of him to put Marius to the task of appointing someone to appoint someone to cover that particular appointment.

As for Doctor, Anji, Fitz and Bloom, even Count de Vries, the Governor hoped he would never have to see them ever again.

For those interested in such things, Bloom's effect on the race was instantaneous. The Bronstein yacht almost immediately edged into

first place beyond the favourite, the hyper-equipped official imperial entry from Earth. This was much to the chagrin of that Manchester United of race teams.

It was close, certainly an exciting race. Only the rank outsider, the comedy entry from the anarchist Proudhon Conglomerates, was well out of the running. That team's insistence on a mass crew vote on every minor course correction, with the subsequent arguments this inevitably entailed, ensured that the yacht was doing well simply when it avoided travelling in circles.

They were already over a day behind.

Only once or twice in the early days of Stage Two did anything happen to distract those dedicated competitors from their single-minded obsession.

This was the distant sighting of strange floating sculptures, haphazard crys-talline formations gleaming in the sun and sea. These 'formations' were small, like clumps of ice. Small but definitely growing.

Chapter Eight

107

It was impossible to register these objects electronically, whatever they were, for they resisted all attempts at scanning. Moreover, upon discovery all instrumentation on the yachts in question would go crazy: radar, compass, communications, navigation. Only out of line of sight of the formations would the equipment return to normal.

The crews reported the anomalies then continued their business of winning the race. A mild concern spread amongst the race organisers who even went to the trouble of sending out helijets to investigate the strange objects but upon arrival at the co-ordinates nothing could be found. Nothing but ocean. The experts scratched their chins, nodded and concluded that a proper investigation could wait until the race was over. After all, they didn't have money riding on clumps of slushy crystal.

Only the Doctor, scouring charts in the Major's helijet as they searched for the missing Captain Cho and his submarine, really grew concerned about the floating objects. As he monitored the yachts' reported discoveries he thought long and hard about what was happening here on Selonart. What was being *engineered*. He thought long and hard and became very, very worried.

Major Kallison was, in her case, worried about the Doctor. They had been flying low across the waters for two days now. On his orders they had stopped only to recharge the helijet's fuel cells, catching a few hours sleep when they could.

She was wondering whether it had been such a good idea to allow him so much slack on the lead she was trying to keep round his neck.

Why was he so determined to avoid a confrontation with this Count de Vries? She had her mission and she didn't like delay. It was in her blood to go straight for De Vries. Unfortunately, he was her only clue, her only link to the true nature of 'De Vries'. Short of actually landing on the Count's boat and arresting him she didn't really have anything else to go on. And to arrest a member of the imperial house, for De Vries's roots did indeed sink very deep, without a shred of evidence of wrongdoing would not have done much for her mission.

Major Kallison had to accept that the Doctor was their only way forward.

If he wanted to go off and find a submarine then she was going to have to let him.

There was the other reason, of course. The one about knowing who the Doctor really was.

Chapter Eight

108

Despite the stealth engine and helmets, the noise of the low-humming helijet day after day was starting to drive her nuts.

She watched carefully as the Doctor sat staring at the map-com, tracing lines in the blue charts as if running his thumb across the waves. He was hel-metless, apparently able to concentrate in the worst of conditions. Kallison watched as he screwed up the plastic sheet and hurled it across the cabin.

Warner and Bloch, her two pretty boy corporals, looked at her, signalling their amusement at the Doctor's rage. They slapped the equipment packs resting on their knees. It hadn't been much fun cooped up with those two either.

'Pockets of this ice all over the planet and we can't find a single crystal!' he blazed.

‘It might help if you told us what to look for,’ said Kallison.

‘It’s the key to everything!’ he shouted back. ‘The submarine was the first.

The first release of energy. It must be around here. Where?’

The cabin lights flickered. Kallison looked out of the porthole. Below, the endless pampas of blue flashing by. Ahead. . .

‘Major!’ came the pilot’s crackling voice through the helmetcom. ‘Something up ahead.’

She saw the Doctor raise his head in angry relief. ‘About time,’ he muttered.

Kallison steadied herself across the cabin and hauled open the hatch to the cockpit. The Doctor was right on her heels, almost pushing her out of the way. The wind hacked at their faces.

You could hardly miss it. It was the size of a mountain. Tiny in the immensity of the ocean but as they closed in. . .

‘My god,’ said Kallison.

‘If you’ve got any ominous music,’ said the Doctor softly, ‘now’s the time. I think you’d better land this thing, pilot. I have a feeling you’re going to be losing communications very soon. I wouldn’t like to think you’d lose motive power too.’

‘Major?’

‘Do it,’ she ordered, eyes never leaving the gleaming mass ahead of them.

It looked just like an iceberg. Dirty white, polished, heavy like it shouldn’t float. And menacing; that sense of blind relentless. An unstoppable force of nature.

‘I think we’ve found your submarine, Major.’

‘Where?’

Chapter Eight

Meaningfully, he looked out at the mountain. Kallison lurched as the helijet skis hit the water. She heard their *phht phht* as they skimmed the waves.

The craft shrieked out its braking and jolted to a halt.

‘If I’m right,’ said the Doctor, ‘under that lot.’

The instrumentation went dead, just like he said it would. Kallison was just forcing the Doctor into a neoprene wetsuit when it happened. Suddenly they were alone in a metal shell, drifting in a vast nowhere. No squawking radio, no computer hum, no nothing. Kallison felt the silence like a new sound in her helmet earpiece.

‘I don’t think it should affect the engines,’ the Doctor insisted. ‘Not unless I’m totally wrong. Which is very rare.’

Kallison grunted. She was feeling grumpy because she had utterly failed to convince the Doctor to stay on board whilst she, a highly trained diver, went and looked for the sub. Not only that, he didn’t seem to realise that wearing a diving suit meant he would have to change out of his clothes. An operation which proved more difficult than prising a clam out of its shell.

Finally, Kallison had been forced to threaten him that if he didn’t remove them, she and her men would.

‘Not even my jacket?’ he blustered. ‘How about over the top?’

Kallison shoved the mouthpiece home. Warner was already at the lowering ramp at the rear of the helijet. He would be accompanying the Doctor, and no questions. Bloch was unclipping the mini-sub, a battered yellow cylinder with stubby fins.

‘Just find the *Gallant* and come back,’ Kallison ordered. ‘No mucking about now. Once you’ve located the sub, we can bring in the local boys to do the actual rescuing.’

‘What makes you think its in one piece anyway?’ asked Warner, raring to get going. ‘Why wouldn’t it have just blown up?’

‘Rrrflggghwwmrrr,’ replied the Doctor. And that was all the explanation they were going to get.

Kallison pulled the mouthpiece away. ‘You sure you’re going to be all right?’

'Don't worry about me,' said the Doctor, chirpily. 'Mind you, it's been a while. Can't exactly remember when, which is a bit worrying. Never mind.'

'You're really reassuring me, Doctor. Just stick close to Corporal Warner.'

Chapter Eight

110

'For goodness sake, stop fussing. I am not a child!' Upon which, he waddled petulantly to the edge of the ramp and leaped in.

Once Warner had fished him out and put his mouthpiece in properly, and the coughing had subsided, they tried again. Warner and Bloch lowered the little torpedo into the water and this time the Doctor sat on the edge of the ramp before shuffling in. Kallison put her hand over her mouth to stop herself giggling. The Doctor was glaring at her through his goggles. He couldn't speak but the meaning was clear: 'Don't say a word!'

Warner revved the engine, forced the Doctor to clamp on to the side of the mini-sub and down they went. The smile disappeared from Kallison's face.

She looked at Bloch. 'Get that comm-link working,' she barked. 'Now!'

It really had been a long time. The Doctor tried to relax as Warner eased the sub through the light, bubbling water. Like Fitz before him, he was surprised by the frictionless ease with which they sailed. Already they were travelling at a speed impossible in a more familiar chemical composition. His ears popped and he remembered why it was he rarely did this sort of thing.

He didn't like the constriction, the way one was cocooned. This ocean was too quiet, none of the usual garbled squeaks and organic burbles he associated with being underwater. Nothing lived here, nothing at all. Just the whirring of the mini-sub, the whoomph of movement and that tiny beating of blood in one's ears. The Doctor found himself breathing too quickly, on the edge of... what was it? Panic. Him?

He checked his respiration, forced himself to calm down. Warner was hunched over, steering the little yellow capsule through these bucking currents, seemingly unaffected by his own claustrophobia.

Whatever the Major's own personal goals were in all this was unimportant to him now. She wasn't telling him everything, he knew that, but he had no choice. Or perhaps she had no ulterior motive. Just one of the universe's good guys. It would have been nice. He had to trust her. He needed her and her team.

What was Sabbath trying to achieve?

Up ahead he saw the first smudge of crystal, like a frozen wall. If it was a mountain on the surface it was a range below. This phenomena, whatever it was, had got so big. As they closed in, he could see the water around the formation churning, caught in the grip of some fuming chemical reaction.

He found himself thinking he wasn't prepared enough. Wasn't ready.

Chapter Eight

111

Warner eased off on the throttle to check their speed. The Doctor held on to the metal tablet, trying to see through this increasingly murky water.

He tapped Warner and pointed straight down. What if the submarine was trapped right in the middle of this thing, the mountain growing round it like a pearl round a speck of grit? He was guessing that hadn't happened; theorised that it had something to do with the power units. A nuclear explosion had occurred, yes, but not the submarine.

He felt the pressure increasing as they dropped, heard his harsh breathing through the respirator. Normal, at last.

Finally, they reached the lowest extremity of the formation. It was like being underneath the ceiling of some enormous darkened cathedral. The crystal exuded a sickly, luminous glow. The Doctor made a circling motion.

Warner twisted the mini-sub and they began to circumnavigate the churning water. The sea was darker here, the shadow of the giant blocking out the Selonart sun.

There it was. Right at the base of the mass. Warner nodded. He was too excited, too young. Dangerous.

The nose of the submarine stuck out through the crystals, like someone had thrown a yellow pen into a snowball. It looked dead, a mournful museum piece. Slowly, they drifted towards it.

The Doctor blinked. Was he mistaken? There. . . there seemed to be two of them. Two submarines. Three! And more, stuck like ghosts in the ice. A reflection? Impossible.

He had to be mistaken. He looked again. The replicas seemed to shift and wave in the water's current. Holograms?

Closer. They had to move in closer whatever the danger. Warner was shaking his head and flapping one hand in front of his face, as if to wave away a wasp. Was he too seeing the ghosts? The Doctor pressed a hand into his shoulder to reassure him.

Something moaned in the distance. A creak or a burble. The crystals cracking?

They were not going to be able to stay down here long. Just a few minutes, a quick look then away. He just needed to know what it was all for.

Something pushed at the Doctor's chest. Something, some force pressing him. The noises were more insistent now, and he recognised them as artificial in origin. Voices from a badly tuned radio. A multitude of them, a cacophony.

Echoing clangs, metallic rattles. In fact, the kind of underwater echoes one Chapter Eight

112

would expect to hear near a moving submarine but multiplied over and over.

And then he knew. He knew what had happened.

This crew wasn't dead; the submarine was not lifeless. What had happened to them dared the imagination to comprehend. There was nothing to be done for them. Not now.

The Doctor jabbed at Warner's back. The corporal turned and the Doctor saw the disorientation behind his mask. He was much more affected than the Doctor had guessed. He pointed straight up.

Warner slapped his hand away.

The Doctor felt a moment of confusion and then understood. Warner was going to try to reach the submarine. Suddenly all his panic and claustrophobia came back to him. He would be stuck down here, beneath this mountain, the weight of it all on him. The mouthpiece slipped out of his teeth and he tasted the warm Selonart ocean. Bubbles plumed upwards with a roar.

Hurriedly, he scrawled at Warner's back, trying to turn his course. Angrily, the corporal pushed him away. Up ahead, metres away, the sea churned, transforming itself into something much, much more than water. The Doctor tried to grip Warner's suit and drag him.

With all the speed of youth, Warner reached down and unclipped the Doctor from the mini-sub, and he pushed him off. Without his breathing apparatus, lungs full, the Doctor was unable to react. He spiralled away as, instantly, the mini-sub sped from him, straight up towards the trapped vessel.

'No, Warner! No!' he tried to shout but couldn't. He spewed out water and rammed the mouthpiece back in.

Corporal Warner began to *separate*.

At first, there was a double image of him and the mini-sub. Then a triple.

A dozen Warners, like frames in a cartoon, rising up towards the buried submarine. Noise, quadruple-printed and synched, assailed the Doctor's ears.

At last, he saw the leading Warner, presumably the original, crane his head back round to him. The other Warners copied his movements. Whether or not he knew what was happening to him, the Doctor could not see. The water was too dark, the glass in his mask too dense. At last, there were so many shapes that it seemed a giant fist had squeezed a dozen model Warners into one packed mass. And then he was gone, lost in that swirling cloud.

Shocked, the Doctor stared up into the inanimate behemoth that had swallowed the soldier.

Only when he looked at his own arm and saw the hazy reflections of it

Chapter Eight

113

swimming along with him, felt the shadow in his mind split him did he realise he was not free of the effects himself.

Desperately, the Doctor turned and kicked out. He hacked his way through the weightless water, all thoughts gone but to remain whole and to reach the light once more.

They pulled him from the water half an hour later. Kallison was going frantic.

Not only could they not get the comm-link working but nothing was working.

Compass, pre-ignition, the clocks, all gone dead. The pilot was perched on the nose of the helijet, its front panels folded out. He was swearing profusely as he sweated and tried to beg the engine into life. The engines were fine, just as the Doctor had said. The problem was getting them started.

She found herself increasingly staring out at the iceberg in the distance.

Yes, it definitely looked *forbidding*. A big blank white idiot's face. A face that seemed to be growing.

Bloch was all suited up and raring to get down after Warner and the Doctor.

Between them they'd managed to convince themselves that both were in serious trouble. And she wanted the Doctor, wanted them both, intact.

She was on the verge of ordering Bloch in when the Doctor surfaced. He was in a bad way, shaking and hyperventilating. 'I couldn't stop him!' he babbled as they pulled the suit off him. 'He wouldn't. . . wouldn't. . . '

Bloch hauled the Doctor in and threw him to the helijet deck. 'I'm

going in,' he snapped. 'We don't leave our men behind.'

'Don't be an idiot,' Kallison retorted. 'No one goes anywhere until we know what we're dealing with.'

The Doctor crawled across the cabin, clutching his clothes; eyes wide with shock. 'I tried to pull him back. He wouldn't listen. Wouldn't listen.'

'All right, Doctor,' said Kallison. She tried to lift him up. 'Just tell us. What happened? Did you find the sub?'

'What about Warner?' asked Bloch, angry and trembling.

'He's gone...'

'I'm going in.'

'He's gone!' screamed the Doctor. He threw Kallison off. Striding up to Bloch he jabbed a finger at his face. 'Don't you understand? He's gone and there's nothing you can do. You'll become part of it yourself.' He caught his own temper and breathed deeply to calm himself. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry. He's Chapter Eight

114

gone. The crystal formation, it just swallowed him up. He's caught in the chronometric matrix.'

'The what?' asked Kallison.

'We have to warn the Governor.'

'After dealing with De Vries, you mean.'

He looked at her strangely. 'No. Even if he escapes, we have to get everyone off Selonart before leaving becomes impossible.'

It took another hour and a half before the Doctor managed to rig up a manual bypass for the helijet engines. And all the time the mountain grew towards them.

Kallison spent the time brooding over the Doctor's last imperative. Without a comm-link she couldn't do anything but wait and stare at him.

He had recovered incredibly quickly from his underwater turmoils.

There he was on the nose of the helijet, spanner and wrench in his hands, fairly crackling with energy. Again, all according to the descriptions. Kallison, not for the first time, struggled to keep herself calm. With the Doctor, they were supposed to be in with a chance. She must keep him close.

‘Try it now,’ he called in to the pilot, who hammered at the worn starter switch.

The helijet twitched and coughed. The fusion pumps began to clang and hum. This was the fifth time they had tried this. Kallison looked up at the encroaching mass of crystal. She heard an ominous low rumble; the water fizzing under the mountain.

They weren’t going to have many more chances at getting started. The hot sun breathed sticky air over them. A sheen of perspiration seemed to cover everything.

‘This isn’t going to work, Major,’ said Bloch. He too was eyeing the Doctor, but it was only mistrust Kallison saw in him.

The engine caught. A cloud of oily smoke enveloped the Doctor. He waved the spanner and wrench in a primitive display of joy. He slammed the sun-cooked casing over the nose. The cabin shuddered as the overhead rotors began to creak round. There came the whine of the fusion-jet.

The pilot turned and gave Kallison the thumbs up.

They circled the blanched mountain once more before they left for Beta Marina. Kallison had an uneasy moment of realisation. Without any electronic Chapter Eight

115

recording they had absolutely no evidence of its presence on the planet.

‘Hopefully the geo-sats will be able to grab something from orbit. Even if it’s just a dark patch. That would be a start.’ The Doctor seemed to be reading her mind but he spoke as if needing to be convinced.

‘What is it? Not ice.’

‘No,’ he replied. ‘Not ice. Although it is water, to a degree. More than

water.'

Registering her frown, he continued.

'It's water altered by quantum

chronometry. I've never seen anything like it. Theoretically possible of course, but the energy required. . . ' He looked round at the blank faces.

'Imagine a molecule of water, the tiniest piece. As it moves with the current, there are an infinite number of possibilities as to how it will react. Well, almost infinite.'

'I am aware of quantum theory, Doctor,' said Kallison archly.

'Not like this. In a sense, each possibility occurs. Whatever the molecule chooses to do replicates that molecule and splits it into its particular strand of reality. An alternate reality, if you like. They then all go off their own way.'

What we are seeing here is all those possibilities when they don't go off their own way. When the possibilities, some of them at least, get blocked and stay here and all crush up in on themselves. Fitz felt it back on the lifeboat. The process consumed Warner; even I was affected. Those poor sailors in the submarine were caught right in the middle of it. They're in there now, split into their own infinitives, if you'll excuse the flippancy.'

'Dead?' snapped Bloch.

'I don't know. From shock perhaps. It must have been dreadful, feeling it creeping over them. Otherwise, in limbo, swamped by double-printed carbons of their beings. Every possibility, never moving. Their minds too.'

Perhaps. . . just waiting. In a sense, what you're seeing here is a time traffic jam.'

'That's. . . '

'Corny. Yes, exactly what Anji would say. Of course, I suspected that this was the case some time ago. I just didn't expect to see it happening on such a large scale.'

Kallison tried to get her head round these concepts. 'Doctor, come on.

This is impossible.'

He nodded. 'Yes, I know. But somehow Sabbath has engineered it, here on Selonart. Must be something to do with the natural composition of the Chapter Eight

116

water. He blew up the yacht to provide nuclear energy to jump start the process. The submarine was lured in and trapped. It's still operational, still providing fuel for the furnace.'

The Doctor shook his head, as if to contradict himself. 'No. Even then the amount of radiation dumped into the water would have to be...' Kallison felt him grip her arm. He looked mournfully out of the shivering window and up at the sky. He sighed. 'Would have to be astronomical. Oh bravo, Sabbath. That's clever; that is brilliant.'

Kallison followed his gaze upwards. She didn't get it. Nothing up there except the huge sun, blue sky and the occasional metallic flash of a satellite in low orbit. High high above, like miniature stars.

Satellites. Thousands of them. All monitoring the race. All scanning the surface continuously, throughout the race. All bathing the water with tele-metric radiation. The biggest and most widely monitored race in the history of all the races.

'What can we do?' she asked, trying to comprehend the level of intelligence that could have known all this. 'What can we do, Doctor?'

Suddenly, he seemed to be thinking about something else. His face became...

blank, aesthetic, dreamy. 'What's the prize here, Sabbath?' he whispered. 'What's in it for you?'

'Doctor!'

He came back. 'We can get a move on for one thing. There must be some augmenting catalyst in the water itself. Even with all that energy prompting it, it would still need more. It must unlock nuclear energy from the water's own chemistry. If this is a chain reaction then before we know it the whole planet is going to be infected.'

'Which means?'

‘Which means the quantum effect will spread until everything that lives is consumed by it. The whole planet gridlocked.’

He leaped out of his seat and scrambled up to the pilot. ‘Fast as you like, driver,’ he said. ‘Don’t spare the horses.’

Turning back he looked at them and bit his lip. Over the increasing whine of the engine he shouted, ‘I hate to be forced to pun but we’re running out of time.’

Governor Marius waved away another lackey carrying up a message from the irritating Anji he was keeping waiting in the reception a long way down.

Chapter Eight

117

Somehow she kept talking these fawning idiots into coming up personally rather than fob her off on comm-links. Why wouldn’t the wretched woman get the message? He was: TOO BUSY!

He had better things to do. Monitor the progress of the race for one.

He glanced up at the impressive, super-slick vidscreens hanging in his office. This was the real blood of Selonart, not that pallid theatrical stage-stuff dreamed up in the conspiracies of strangers. If she and the Doctor had something to sort, let them sort it. Leave him to deal with what was important.

Each yacht was represented on its own screen, ploughing through the surf at incredible speeds. Another showed a graphical representation of their relative positions. Marius noted wryly that the Bronstein vessel was widening the gap between itself and its followers. Unusual. Nice turn up for the books. Keeps the money spinning. Already the odds were lengthening, and shortening and doing their business.

The plaudits were still coming in from the sponsors. This was without doubt the most majestic, the most exciting and the most profitable Selonart race in imperial history. It was the greatest race ever.

He was to be well rewarded. He would retire on those rewards; get off this planet forever. Go somewhere. . . dry.

The problems of Stage One were just history. A bit of fun. He was a great Governor. He would be remembered as the best Governor.

Maybe he should go out and make a speech.

The screens flicked off, as if someone had pulled the plug. Darkness and then loud hissing static.

Oh Christ, he thought. Not again. Please, not again.

Not everything had gone. There was a phone on his desk; a landline for the sponsors installed almost as a joke to cater for the impossibility of a repeat of the original blackout. There was a little light on the top of it blinking an angry red.

The Governor did not know it but the Fourteenth Selonart Trans-Global Regatta was over.

Mikron Systems ComSat #451 drifted around the globe of Selonart. Streams of data whirred and pumped through its systems. It processed them as unemotionally and as smugly as it had for a month. Lights blinked on its shell as it transmitted its unscrambled data to the waiting masses gathered greedily further out into space: partying in their packed orbital hotels.

Chapter Eight

118

If the ComSat registered the new datastream it suddenly received from Selonart, it made no comment upon the matter. It couldn't; the datastream wouldn't allow such an act.

Micro-seconds later, the flickering lights on its shell stopped blinking, as did those on all its unthinking colleagues. It continued its slow, gradual freefall round the planet, unaware that some long time in the future its orbit would decay sufficiently to permit its cremation in the planetary atmosphere.

Of this, it was unconcerned.

Mikron Systems ComSat #451 was dead.

Chapter Nine

Now folks, you may be thinking that to get caught on a doomed yacht once might be unlucky. To do it twice, well I'll forgive you if you consider that stupid. All I can say is, maybe I walked into the first one but with the fate of the Bronstein the whole process was completely

against my will.

Not nice to spend one's day under the sentence of death. Even worse, they made me work as well! The cheek.

There I was, poor old hard-done-by Fitz, down in the hold, chains wrapped around my ankles, pumping out filthy water and scraping up god knows what effluent that managed to stick itself to the floor. Labouring under the knowledge that these nuts could waste me when the wind changed and they felt the urge.

That black-eyed Valeria kept popping down every now and then to keep my morale up with taunts about the various methods she was going to employ to do away with me. I called her boring but she just found that funny.

I'm not a violent man (stop laughing at the back) but I really was looking forward to some chance I might get to clang her with my rusty shovel. If it hadn't been for the knowledge that she was waiting for me to try that very thing, as well as the gun she kept handy, I would have done it too.

No, there didn't seem much of a way out for old Fitz. My life depended on Bloom, whom I never saw, and there was nothing I could do about it. I could hardly escape, could I?

The yacht was functional but not luxurious. It was certainly fast. We bumped and jumped along; more than once I was bundled over by some particularly vigorous manoeuvre. Half-starved and tired, I could feel the old despair start to bite. There had to be a way out, there had to be. If only I could find it.

I reckon I was down there for two days, down in the stinking bowels of that boat, scraping and pumping. After which time I was reduced to praying the Doctor would come and rescue me. Assuming he could work out where I was of course. My hopes were not high.

119

Chapter Nine

120

When they finally came for me, I was sure it was all up. First of all, the noise of the engine altered. I heard running, some shouting. Then the lights went out. Total blackness. Memories of the last yacht came

winding their way back.

I didn't think it would be long before something came looking for me. I found myself shivering. If something did come, I was hardly in a state to fight it off.

I was almost relieved when what opened the hatch door turned out to be human. A group of three, Valeria in the lead. She was a funny one.

Compared to the rest of the crew, grey slabs of faces the lot of them, she looked like an angel; but whatever lurked in her head was far from beatific.

They couldn't have looked more like an execution squad if they'd tried.

I held the rusty shovel up. Hopeless, but I wasn't going to walk meekly to my death. I gritted my teeth in what I hoped was a terrifying leer.

'What's wrong with your face?' asked Valeria. 'Are you ill?'

I held back, raising the shovel. 'Come on then. Give it your best shot.' Not great, I know, but it had been a long two days.

Valeria shook her head. 'Put that down,' she said. 'The Captain has work for you.'

She and her cronies led me up through the dark, faceless yacht. They were on edge, weapons ready, torches scouring every nook and cranny on the way.

There was no décor on this yacht, just harsh military stencils rubbed into the walls to tell them where everything was. I felt more than a little undignified as I tiptoed along in the dark, ankles chains rattling all over the deck.

All was not well on the Bronstein yacht. What crew I saw looked even more blank and depressed than usual. Mind, it took two days swabbing the hold to be able to tell. Sounds seemed to be stifled. Where was the hum of racing motors? The excited babble and urgency of the race?

It was about now I started to feel that I was about to enter a new stage of what the Doctor sometimes euphemistically describes as 'excitement'. I call it plain old dread. It had to be bad if the Captain wanted me involved.

They ushered me on to the bridge. Again, it was a bleak affair. No frills, strictly economy. The crew manned their posts like automatons, not speaking, not deviating from their work. I could see they had their instrument panels open and were working hurriedly away at fixing wires and stuff. The Chapter Nine

121

engine sound was muted, like the vessel was idling. Something had definitely gone wrong.

Through the spray-blasted windows, I saw ominously it was night again.

Night. Not a good time to be on one of these yachts.

Captain Levin was staring out to sea. If he felt any of the romance, any thrill for voyaging in open ocean, he certainly didn't show it. In fact, I had the distinct impression that he was rather upset by the whole affair. Like he would rather be doing something, anything, else. Might have had a word in the team selectors' ears if I'd been there back when they picked these things.

This is what I would have said: 'Don't let him captain your yacht. The sea makes him angry.'

'Comrade Fitz,' he barked. Yep, definitely angry. 'I am glad I made the decision to spare your life.'

'You're not the only one,' I snapped back. Whoops, mouth before brain.

How many times had the Doctor told me? At least I didn't add that in fact it had been Bloom's idea rather than his. Typical of that lot, rewriting history to suit themselves.

'In your company, Fitz, how the hours must fly by,' said Valeria. She sounded weary. Can't imagine why.

Funnily enough, I was starting to find the way she spoke, like a bad villain, rather endearing. That's what two days under a death sentence does for you.

The rolling 'r's, the slightly imperfect sentence construction. 'Quite, quite sweet,' I said, without realising I was doing it. Stir-crazy, you see.

‘What are you babbling about, moron?’ she snapped.

‘Valeria, we haven’t time for this,’ said Captain Levin.

‘What do you want?’ I asked. ‘Bloom?’

The Captain turned began to pace the deck. ‘I need information. Information concerning the destruction of the MikronCorps yacht. And I need this information now.’

I detected the panic beneath his reserve. All at once, I understood.

Strangely, once I *had* understood, the thought that gripped me was: it isn’t fair! Not twice!

That thing was on this yacht too. Or another thing like it. And my head was still sore from the last one. Bloody typical.

IT WASN’T FAIR!

‘You know something, Fitz?’ asked Valeria, who seemed to possess an unusual amount of insight for the product of such a lifeless culture. Either Chapter Nine

122

that or she was trained to read people like me.

‘What I know is this. Send an SOS and abandon ship.’

‘The race is our primary objective,’ the Captain began. ‘Nothing must. . .’

‘The race is over, Captain. Get off the yacht, blow it up and get as far away as you can. That, or you’re all dead.’

‘I would have expected something like that from you.’

Valeria was

snarling/smiling again. ‘Something. . . desperate.’

I nodded. I could foresee how this was going to pan out. ‘I don’t expect you to believe me. However, it is the only way you’re going to survive.’

‘I think not,’ said the Captain. And suddenly his face flushed with

anger and he punched me in the stomach. I hit the floor, tears in my eyes as I tried to suck air back in again. Something like steel ball bearings rolled around in my insides.

'Please forgive the Comrade Captain,' said Valeria. 'His term of service as gulag governor has rarefied certain tastes in him.' Her voice sang through the rushing in my ears.

Arms gripped me and hoisted me to my feet. The Captain grinned through his orange moustache. 'She may have a point. I like to run my ship as I would run the gulag. Maximum efficiency. Individuals to serve the greater good. And sacrifice, of course. Sometimes, much sacrifice.'

I nodded through the water in my eyes. 'Each to their own.'

I thought he was going to hit me again but somehow he managed to hold himself in check. Instead, he placed his stubby hands behind his back and paced around me. Valeria lit a black cigarette; always amused.

'Now it is your turn for the sacrifice, Comrade,' said the Captain.

'You don't really think I'm going to help you, do you? You're going to kill me whatever I do. I don't care what happens to you.' I mean, let's face it. All they had to do at the beginning was be nice. But no, they had to show off didn't they.

'But you do care what happens to Comrade Bloom,' said Valeria, inhaling deeply. Captain Levin coughed. It was like someone had let off a smoke grenade. Someone needed to tell her about the dangers of passive smoking.

What was I thinking?

'No way,' I snapped. 'That's the same trick you used on him. It won't work.'

You need him too much.'

'With the race in jeopardy,' said the Captain, 'he has suddenly become dispensable.'

Chapter Nine

‘And it’s not like we’re asking a lot, Fitz,’ Valeria smiled. ‘This is some chance for you. You know it.’

They had me there. As long as I was alive and not locked up in their bilge-basement, I did have a chance. She could see right through me. She knew I’d never give up and die. And there was Bloom to consider. They were using us against each other and there was nothing I could do.

Except nod.

The Captain smiled. It was the smile of a man who didn’t know the meaning of the word humour.

‘Now you have offered our glorious state your service, I wish you to listen.

Without interruption.’

He made a funny coughing noise which I interpreted as laughter. He thought he had said something terrible witty. I was not one to dissuade him of that notion.

‘Fire away. . . ’ I said. ‘Not literally, of course.’ Just in case he had any ideas.

He glared at me. ‘Two hours ago, our communication and navigation systems went off-line. All of them. We are unable to contact our support teams.

The same conditions that occurred when the MikronCorps yacht was destroyed. Naturally, I roused the crew and they have been striving to overcome whatever malfunction has overwhelmed them.’

‘Good luck,’ I offered brightly.

‘They will of course succeed. Bronstein technology is the greatest in the galaxy. Sabotage, no doubt. The Imperium does not like to lose. It is undoubtedly their decadent scheme.’

‘Oh undoubtedly.’ I nodded again. Very vigorously. ‘Whatever you say.’

‘Your sarcasm has been noted. And will be dealt with accordingly at a more appropriate juncture.’

‘Look,’ I said. ‘What is it you want me to do? I can’t mend busted

communication equipment. You need diodes, connections, molecular err – that kind of thing.'

'Shut up,' snapped Captain Levin. He wanted to hit me again. He really did. My inane rambling was paying off. For what, I don't know, but at least he was getting annoyed. 'We have lost power to our lower decks. The engines have been removed from Bronstein control. Our engineer has gone missing,'

he continued.

Chapter Nine

124

Ah. Little bit of an alarm bell there. 'Missing? In what way missing?

Maybe he fell overboard. Maybe he killed himself. Living on this ship he'd sure want to. . . '

'Oh we found him,' said Valeria. She took another relaxed deep drag on that filthy stick. 'Some of him, anyway. He had been most interestingly. . .

rearranged.'

I started to think that maybe that bilge basement wasn't as bad as I'd first thought. 'And what was it you wanted me to do, exactly?'

'You are aware of the serf in the minefield?' asked Valeria. She finished her cigarette. She dropped it and crushed it under her heel. 'Cheaper and quicker than fancy technology. This is a very big yacht. We want you to go and find who it was who rearranged him.'

Some people, you know the ones – those who know everything but have done nothing – say that the worst fear is the fear that you don't know.

Rubbish. I had a damn good idea what was waiting for me in the bowels of that Bronstein ship and what scared me was that I knew exactly what it was.

I also knew why they'd sent me. For all his bluster, the Captain was frightened daffy. Whether that was because of what his bosses would say if he didn't win the race, or blew up the yacht or whatever, or whether he suspected that whatever was lurking down there was more

than capable of getting all of them I don't know. Probably both.

I understood how he felt. My mouth was as dry and innards as loose as an infantryman's going into battle. I didn't want to do this. I really didn't.

'Keep the hatches closed,' I said as I began to clamber down the metal ladder to the main deck. 'Word of advice.' I tried to keep my voice even.

The yacht was tipping and buckling in the night current. On the way down from the bridge (escorted by Valeria of course), we had clambered over the sleek deck plating in a spray of fine droplets. All of which served to remind me, as if I needed reminding, of the first yacht I'd been stuck on.

Something was glowing in the distance. I couldn't see precisely what it was. Off the stern. It looked like, I don't know, plasticine covered in some cheap luminous paint. Valeria shrugged when I pointed it out to her. Clearly curiosity wasn't one of her strong points. Mind you, from what I'd seen of the Bronstein colonies, curiosity was likely to get you dead. 'Some kind of rock, is it?' she said. 'We spotted it just before nightfall.' She seemed Chapter Nine

125

more interested in keeping her blonde hair under wraps. Women. Especially homicidal women; they're the worst. Vain, you know what I'm saying.

'Don't you think it might have something to do with what's happening?' I asked.

'What? Like a "sentient killer rock"? Grow up, Fitz.'

'What's a nice girl like you doing here? Doing this kind of job?'

Valeria smiled. It was not nice. 'The colony recognised genetic traces in the womb that indicated I would develop psychotic aggressive tendencies.'

So they put me through Security School. And that's enough about me. We have a job to do.'

I stopped. What had she said? 'You mean you're coming with me?'

She sniffed. ‘Well, I’m not just going to let you escape, am I?’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing.’

‘Open the hatch.’

Once inside, the yacht was as dark as I remembered it. Captain Levin had ordered the whole crew up to the command section, well over the water level. They had already started unpacking their heavy weaponry when we left. Still, it was nice to get those chains off my ankles.

Valeria flicked her torch on. ‘It would help if you told me what we expected to find.’

‘You don’t want to know,’ I replied. ‘If you want my advice, and I know you don’t, we should just wait here for a few minutes then get ourselves to a lifeboat. It really is our only chance.’

Something cold and I imagine very deadly pressed itself into my back. ‘Just get moving. Engine room.’ She had lost her customary bonhomie. I didn’t know whether to be worried or not. I figured worried was probably safest.

It was all too familiar. The creaky empty cabins, the darkness. I presume we were doing exactly what the MikronCorps crew had done before the dried up feller overwhelmed them. I wondered where Bloom might be, whether he knew what was going on. I could have done with his reassuringly stocky presence right now, I don’t mind admitting.

We sneaked down a couple more ladders, right down to the bottom. I hadn’t been at this end of the yacht before. My little cell had been at the bow end, the one that let all the water in. I would definitely have gladly gone back there now if I’d been given the option. All was quiet, except for the hissing of the water through which we travelled. Quiet, except for. . . yes, the faint noise of the engines. Like before, they sounded sick, out of phase.

Chapter Nine

126

‘This is where we found Leonid,’ said Valeria. We were sneaking through a larger thoroughfare, some kind of walk-through stores. Ugly metal scaffold-ing towered over us. Lots of shadows. Lots of places for nasty things to hide.

Valeria shone her torch on what seemed like a particularly nasty rusty patch.

‘We found him. . . *draped* over this.’

‘You know,’ I said, ‘it really wouldn’t harm us to get the hell out of here.’

‘Shut up,’ she said for the umpteenth time. Nice girl, Valeria. Conversation a bit limited. More reassuringly, she holstered her pistol and reached behind her to produce a very heavy shotgun. ‘Hold the torch and follow me.’

I grabbed the light, watching the beam shake in synch with my hands. I couldn’t see anything but the framework and ominously swinging restraining chains. Water was dripping from somewhere.

‘Jonesy. . . ’ I whispered insanely, making myself smile. I just couldn’t resist.

It made keeping going just that little bit easier.

Valeria walked in front of me. One of these loonies that looks forward to confrontations. I pressed in behind her, lighting the way as we crept through the little aisles. All the technical gear was still on the shelves. If that corpse-monster had gone to work on the engineer, he’d done it quickly and quietly.

The yacht’s engines growled menacingly. How long had we got?

Something rolled across the floor and clumped against a bulkhead. My heart made ‘get out of here!’ leaps in my chest.

‘There,’ Valeria snapped. I shone the torch, expecting to see reaching claws and bared teeth.

Instead, it was some kind of stone urn. It gyrated gently against a crate.

‘That’s not on our manifest,’ muttered Valeria drily.

‘What is it?’

‘Go and look.’

‘Oh thanks.’

Hesitantly, very hesitantly, I walked towards the little grey bowl or ball or whatever it was. It was about the size of my fist. I reached out to touch it, then flinched. All of a sudden, I didn't want to go near it. Oh, it was a harmless looking thing but there was something, something I felt rather than saw. I seemed to feel it was... unclean. There was something corrupt about it, almost an infection. It seemed to be looking at me, like a wizened, knowing baby. Instinctively, I was pulling my hand away.

'What's the matter?' asked Valeria. I sensed her shotgun trained on my back.

Chapter Nine

127

'It's definitely here. It's going to kill everyone and blow up the yacht. I don't know what this is but it belongs to the creature and I'm not touching it.'

'All right,' she said, because of my panic or not I don't know. 'Engine room.'

I stood back and realised I was pouring panicked sweat. I just wanted to get as far away from that empty little stone urn as I could. 'I'm telling you, we should leave.'

'I'll kill you if you try anything.' I heard the tremor in her voice.

'So you keep saying but the thing is, we're dead anyway. See sense.'

She raised the shotgun to my head.

I realised I had come to a decision. I thought about her killing me and I found myself not caring. I just wanted this over. If she was going to shoot me, let her do it. Anything was better than facing that thing again and ending up

'draped'.

She held the gun steady. I stared at her, gritting my teeth and shaking.

I saw her eye widen. There was a glint in it, something like surprise.

'You're really not afraid any more, are you?' She sounded almost impressed.

'Not of you.'

'It's that bad, then.' She was whispering. She nodded, as if coming to her own decision. 'I would like to meet this creature. It would make an interesting kill.'

'You wouldn't stand a chance,' I snapped.

From above, there came the dull thud and crump of weapons firing. Right where we weren't. We had missed the creature; it was already out.

'We shall see,' said Valeria, glancing up at the ceiling.

'What about the engines?'

She was already on her way back the way we came. 'If you are right, Fitz, it is already too late for the engines.'

Then she was off and running. 'Valeria!' I called.

Funny, isn't it? Only known her for a few days and for all of them I had been seeing how much she wanted to kill me and yet I found myself liking her. Don't ask me why, or how, but somehow I admired her. Dumb old Fitz I can hear you telling me, and you would be right.

I had to think. There had to be something I could do. These creatures, they just seemed unstoppable.

Only the urn (and I know you're way ahead of me, but you weren't there were you) seemed to offer any kind of clue. Although the thought of having Chapter Nine

128

to deal with it made me feel sick, it was the only action I could think of taking.

Not giving myself time to contemplate, I hauled some tarpaulin off a shelf and threw it over the urn. gingerly, I wrapped it up, making sure I didn't touch any of its creepy, knowing surface.

The gunfire got louder, unsurprisingly, as I clambered back through the deserted lower decks. I clutched the urn to me. It felt definitely alive, as if a heart was beating through the tarpaulin. It seemed to wriggle under my grip like a captured rat.

Perhaps it was working on me in some way, for my head was swimming.

The dark chambers of this vessel seemed to stretch and shift, warping in and out of phase with the real world. ‘Valeria!’ I shouted over and over, trying to make myself heard over the din of the firing. I thumped into the metal stairs that led back to the surface.

I’d stopped thinking about survival. That seemed such an impossibility I wasn’t going to waste time considering it. I just wanted to face off this thing that scared me so much. Maybe the urn would affect the creature, maybe it wouldn’t. I just wanted to know. In my swimming mind, this seemed to make sense.

The yacht lurched, hard, and I fell back from the ladder into (luckily) something soft. The tarpaulined urn spun away from me as if trying to scuttle into a corner.

With the increasing sense that this was all a dream happening to someone else, I blundered after it.

The world was a blur. It took all my energy to keep it in focus. My hands climbed over canvas and I plucked my little package from the shifting floor.

The firing was louder now. And men screaming.

I grasped the ladder once more and hauled myself up. My limbs felt heavy, weighed down, like I was trying to move more than the usual number, as if they’d grown their own appendages. Flares of gun-light seared the night sky.

Something screeched. Something horrible that I remembered from the other yacht.

I reached the deck and slid in the sheet of water covering it, unable to stand. Ocean wind blasted my face.

Something was grinding its way into the stern: the lump of plasticine I’d noticed earlier. Lumps of the ice stuff were shearing off and scattering Chapter Nine

Undoubtedly this would be the last thing on the crew's mind. However, this luminous spectre seemed much bigger than the glimpse I'd had of it before.

Something thumped on to the deck in front of me. A sickening lifeless clump. A man, one of the Bronstein crew. His face was a bloody mess; his glassy eyes wide in horror. Had he jumped from the bridge? I hoped so.

His body was steaming.

I rolled and stared upwards. I glimpsed movement. Something fast as a bat, screeching and cloaked. Guns flared red and erupted.

That hellish luminous pale light suffused the scene with a sickly glow. I staggered to my feet, trying to get away from the dead sailor. The creature would kill all of them unless I could act. Unable to see clearly any more in the smoke and the movement I followed the noises. Blindly, I climbed the ladder leading up to the bridge. What I hoped to achieve I have no idea. I just kept a madman's grip on that little tarpaulin ball.

'Doctor!' I found myself bellowing. 'Where are you when I need you?' I wanted him there, almost felt he *was* there, urging me upwards, to try to do what I could before it took me.

The gunfire was diminishing now. It sounded half-hearted, as if it had already given up. 'I'm coming!' I yelled. Clever that, giving the thing some warning. Well done, Fitz.

Blood was leaking down the ladder in big fat drops. 'Not so sneaky this time are you!' I snarled at it. I could see its shadow flitting around just above, up on the bridge. A man was screaming, agonised and short. I crawled over the lip of the command deck.

At the top of the ladder, Captain Levin was staring past me out to sea. It was his blood that was draining down over the rungs. His fingers gripped his still-smouldering revolver. His hat had been crushed into his head. I looked into his sightless eyes, wondering why there seemed to be more than one of him.

'Come on!' screamed a voice. 'Come and get me!'

Valeria. A shotgun boomed twice and the creature shrieked. It sounded deranged; exuberant; lost in its own killing.

I had to save her. Now.

Chapter Nine

130

The urn was the key. It had to be. I gripped the red greasy ladder and hauled myself fully up.

The bridge was soaked in blood. Bodies lay stacked, some still twitching.

It was building some kind of sculpture from them. The air was full of smoke and the stink of cordite.

I hissed, cursing the creature. I mean, I had no reason to love the Bronstein crew, but this was hell. And that thing was enjoying itself.

'Fitz! Get out of here!' screamed Valeria from the smoke. She blasted her shotgun again and something crooked and flapping screeched past me out of the mess. I saw a chunk of flesh erupt from its body as the shell hit home. I caught a glimpse of Valeria, stained black and covered in blood, scrabbling with cartridges as she rushed to reload.

The beast picked itself up off the floor and looked at me.

It turned its dry head, grinning. It sniggered, high-pitched like a girl. A cry of recognition. We had met before.

If it could survive a nuclear blast, how the hell could I kill it?

I remember muttering, 'There's a way, my friend. Somehow, I'll get you.'

It tensed, ready to spring at me. 'Valeria, run,' I snapped.

'Get out of here, idiot,' she replied, charming as ever.

I felt seconds stretch out to minutes. The creature nodding its head hyp-notically, dead lips pulling back to bare its teeth further, me staring like some dumb rabbit caught in headlights. I was too transfixed even to run.

As it sprang, two blasts from Valeria's shotgun ripped into it. The force blew the thing sideways and sent it cannoning and squealing into the far wall. Sparks from exposed wiring crackled round it. The noise from the gun dented my ears.

'Run Fitz! Run!' I saw Valeria mouth.

No. I had a better idea. I held up the tarpaulin sack, thrusting it towards the thing. 'Yours, I believe!' I snarled. It flexed its inhumanly sticklike limbs and regained its posture. Yes. There was familiarity in its eyes. It didn't need me to unwrap the parcel, it knew what I was holding.

'Come and get it,' I said. If I could just lure it away from Valeria it would give her a chance.

I ran.

The command deck was small and high up. I didn't have much room. I felt that strange blurring and all of a sudden I remembered what I remembered Chapter Nine

131

it from. The lifeboat, that shard of ice. The deck seemed to split and stretch away, mirroring the split that was going on right inside my head.

I heard scrabbling on the deck behind me and an almighty screech.

Ahead there were a mass of deck rails. I had run out of room already. The dim luminosity of the ice mass shone dully beyond. It had grown to cover half the yacht. There was only one way out. Without pausing, without any time to consider, I vaulted over the deck rail, straight at the crystals, not caring how far I might drop.

The world paused. I waited for an impact that never seemed to come. I felt like I was passing through butter. I saw myself, lots of ourselves as if laid out on a table like photographs, all assuming different permutations of falling.

Perversely, I was reminded of a child's flickerbook. I saw a multitude of decks below me, gently rising up. Then more abstract. Like a drug was working on me. The world began to dissolve into many worlds, many colours, many noises. A dozen Fitzes were growing round me, all falling. I was helpless, I didn't want to move or do anything, just continue these many soft falls. Even movement itself seemed to be just another colour.

I felt the deck pressing into my hands. I guess I had hit it somehow. I was separating, growing, more than just myself. So much was going

on I just wanted to sleep, to allow myself to melt into these new surroundings.

And then something hard, something tangible, grew focused. I must have been lying down and looking up because he seemed like a giant. Who was this? What name?

Standing over me, mouthing words I couldn't hear.

I saw something dark falling over me, like an insect trapped in amber. It too was splitting into copies of itself. Its blossoming form thrashed at what had captured it.

I felt pressure somewhere. . . had I called that an arm? The swimming increased.

And then the noise. The roar of the sea.

I felt the other Fitzes peel away, left in that comforting blanket of ice that was more like warm milk. I was becoming smaller again, diminishing. I felt bruised, pain, a hard wet plastic deck beneath me, cold air striking my face.

Something rubbery clutched in what I now knew was my hand.

'Fitz,' said Bloom.

Chapter Ten

I could hardly believe that just yesterday I had been thinking that if I got any more bored I was going to kill myself.

I was hiding behind the bar, somewhere on the edge of Beta Marina, trying to avoid getting sucked into the riot going on outside. I was angry with the Doctor for getting me into this. Oh yes, and I hadn't eaten or slept for two days.

As people shrieked and fought outside, in a babbling chorus of thrown bottles and drunken chanting, I tried to review the flurry of disasters that ended up with me here, now.

The lobby. That bloody lobby.

I remember, I was heartily sick of waiting. The Governor had fobbed me off for longer than human knowledge. I knew that reception area better than I knew my own home.

Those pot plants, the ding-dong lifts, the cleaners who polished the floor every six hours. The yachting magazines.

I never wanted to see another yacht again in my life. Or another magazine.

I tried bluffing and forcing my way in but clearly the clown upstairs had anticipated that. There were the receptionists from dentist hell, excuses, guards and more excuses. Followed up by more guards. He wasn't going to let me in.

On the afternoon of that second day I gave up. I scribbled a note and begged the doe-eyed nazi receptionist to pass it on, then went back to another evening in the least offensive bar I could find. Sorry Doctor, but there's only so much waiting a girl can take. There was no way I was going to be able to stop the race.

I spent the night, as I had all the nights, slumped over that bar, keeping drunken suits' paws off me and drinking too much coffee. Here I was, surrounded by the largest collection of restaurants this side of New York and I couldn't get a single morsel out of any of them. If the purple bags under my eyes got any bigger people would start thinking my cosmetic surgery had 132

Chapter Ten

133

gone drastically wrong. Even if I'd had money, there wasn't a single spare room or cot in this town. I know because I tried the hotels anyway.

So, I alternately drank the coffee, ate nuts off the bar and went for long reviving walks around these packed streets, trying to avoid drunks and bores banging on about how much they were going to make on the race. In fact, just the same as a Friday night in Chancery Lane. And who said time travel wasn't exciting?

Why had the Doctor sent me here? I suspected even more now: to get me out of the way. Even routine enquiries amongst the locals revealed nothing of Fitz. I tried buttonholing any natives I saw, normally togged up as waiters or cooks, but they just closed ranks immediately. They weren't going to tell an 'Earther' anything, especially about Bloom.

At least something positive: I figured out where that pair must be. It

was in the first bar on that first night. A load of yobs were getting all giddy about the new race leader; some depressing humourless-sounding team from the Bronstein Colonies. They'd been lagging well behind after Stage One but had now unexpectedly taken the lead. One of the yobs was tapping his nose and declaring that they must have got themselves a new Blockhead to navigate them, and there was only one who was that good.

If Bloom was on board that yacht, it was a good guess that Fitz must be too. Fat lot I could do about it. The Doctor had asked me to do two things and I'd failed in both of them. As I sat in the bar on that first night, I'd really felt like jacking it all in and finding some nice rich man to buy me the first of many drinks.

I still couldn't work out what Sabbath wanted here. What had we found?

A bit of ice and a blown up yacht. Hardly the prelude to an invasion. I mean, when were the nasties going to drop in on Beta Marina to invade? When would Sabbath reveal his AWFUL PLAN?

Let's face it, what was the point in invading Selonart? There was nothing here except water.

We needed more clues. You can find clues. Anji, you can set yourself your own agenda.

Right.

How, exactly?

The Doctor would return soon, of course he would. Then I would remind him once again that without money, one finds oneself rather bereft of effective means to investigate.

Chapter Ten

134

It was with a purposeless stride that next morning that I left the Selonart equivalent of 'Cheers' and strode through the harbour. I was looking up at the cylindrical stone palace and cursing the Governor and wondering what to do when the bad things started to happen.

The first I knew about it was that suddenly Beta Marina went quiet.

I hadn't taken in until then just how much noise there actually was here.

Apart from the thousands of what seemed to be permanently roaring voices, there was the jabber of electronic equipment – all those beeps and squawks humanity can't seem to do without. All gone. The voices too. There was nothing but the lapping of the primeval waves. Despite the fact that I was standing in about the most densely packed town I had ever been in I had the strangest feeling that everyone had just upped and left without telling me.

And that couldn't be right.

From one of the parade of luxury yachts, a red-faced, silver-haired man emerged swearing. Amongst the more repeatable of his words, he seemed to be moaning about the lack of information concerning the race. He saw me and sent a few choice words in my direction. I responded in an appropriate manner and flounced away.

It took me a few moments but I sussed it in the end. The blackout had happened again.

The silence quickly ended. Like an approaching tsunami, a quiet murmur rumbled in the distance. The murmur became a snarl became the roar of a thousand disgruntled rich people suddenly not getting exactly what they wanted NOW. About then I heard the first of the smashing glass noises.

My immediate response was that I was too tired for this. I just wanted somewhere safe to lie down. Just let me sleep. The seriousness of the situation failed to jolt my jaded brain. Perhaps I could go back to the Governor's palace; he was bound to want to see me now. He could give me some food and a glass of water.

It seemed a sensible plan at the time. A good plan. Only when I actually saw the cursing, angry mob already swarming into the reception area did I realise that it was rubbish.

The next few hours, well, I don't remember exactly the itinerary but it was a series of nightmares followed by anguished moments followed by panicked scrapes.

The power was off and it didn't look like it was coming on again.
What Chapter Ten

the tourists had decided to do now they couldn't follow the race was wreck Beta Marina.

There is nothing more frightening than angry rich people on the rampage.

Forget burning cars on council estates. Poor people have a natural belief that they are going to get stopped by somebody in the end. Rich people know they can do whatever they like, take it to whatever extreme they like and get away with it.

However, don't think it was all predictable Yahoo stuff. Some of it was unpredictable.

Like the old couple I saw, dressed in their tux and cocktail dress, up on the sun deck of their yacht, drinking champagne and watching the carnage around them. The old dear wore a tiara and every now and then raised a pair of opera glasses to her face to pick out a particularly choice bit of violence.

Neither noticed the flames licking up over the hull of their vessel.

Or the pack of hooray henries who were grabbing passersby, dragging them up the steps of one of the high-diving platforms and throwing their captives into the pool below, all the time betting on some arcane permutation of fall.

Shame the swimming pool had been drained. An ominous new red liquid was filling the gap, seeping out from the increasing pile in the middle of its concrete floor.

Many buildings were on fire. Beta Marina had suddenly become very claustrophobic. Without communications we were marooned. Down at the harbour, overflowing taxi ferries were attempting to crawl their way to the few orbital shuttle-craft moored on huge platforms a mile or two out to sea. Without the means to communicate with their offices off-planet they were all as stuck as the poorest native. It was almost sad to see as many lost and bereft faces as angry ones. They were looking around as if in a daze, trying to find someone else to get them out of the mess, looking round for someone to sue.

About an hour too late, the Governor sent his toughest cops out to break up the riot. All thirty or so. They came wailing out in their little golf carts, letting off blasts of dispersal gas and rubber bullets. They lasted about ten minutes.

It would be fair to say that law and order on Beta Marina had collapsed. It would be fair to say the playground was now occupied by a dense collection of the most competitive vicious capitalists in the galaxy. And woe betide anyone who got in their way.

Chapter Ten

136

I won't bore you with any more details. When you've been involved in one life-threatening mob thing, you've been involved in all of them. There aren't that many variations on the riff.

What happened to me was that I hooked up with one of the natives. He was cowering in the same bar as me, in the kitchen. I found him when I decided I had to do a little looting myself if I wasn't going to starve to death (please note, dear reader, how the stomach can be relied on in the most trying of situations. . . its growling was in danger of giving me away). I sneaked behind the bar, trying not to jump at every scream, jump or crash outside. Luckily, the wave of destruction had already passed over this place; hardly a glass or bottle was left intact, so very few angry raw faces poked in through the jagged window frames. I was hearing a lot of women screaming outside. I didn't want to imagine what Stage Two of this particular Selonart event was involving.

The native was a waiter, or had been once. His uniform was in tatters and soaked in blood. A nasty gash oozed down over his square face from his temple. He was gathering what looked like sodden food when I bundled in.

He made to bolt as soon as he saw me. Fear creased his face. I was determined not to let him go. 'It's all right,' I waved at him. 'It's all right. I'm a friend.'

He didn't look convinced so I tried to think of something else. Friend. 'I'm a friend of Bloom's.'

The waiter wavered. I saw that he seemed a bit less. . . a bit more. . . well, he was more human-looking than Bloom. I guessed he had to be a First Jen or whatever they called them.

'Bloom?' he asked suspiciously. 'You Anji?'

How could he know that? Suddenly it was me that was on the hop. 'Yeah, yeah that's right. I'm looking for him.'

The native shook his head. ‘Not here. Gone. Gone to sea.’

I nodded. ‘I figured.’

He thought for a moment. I could see him eyeing me up, wondering whether he could trust me. ‘Can you help me?’ Nothing wrong with playing the helpless female once in a while.

He paused, then smiled. ‘You come. Take you to Whalen. Yeah, Whalen.

Friend of Bloom too.’ He put a finger to his lips. ‘But sshh now. No noise.

We have safe place. Earther must not find.’

Chapter Ten

137

I gave him the okey-dokey with finger and thumb. ‘You got it, pal. What’s your name?’

He looked confused, like no one had ever asked him. He looked around sharply as a boom of noise erupted outside. ‘Arken,’ he replied. ‘We go now.’

‘Oh yes.’

We stumbled through the ruined kitchen and out into the maze of alley-ways that webbed through the burning remains of Beta Marina. We were heading upwards, towards the cylinder tower. The blinds were down on the Governor’s palace. I wasn’t surprised. Knowing him, he’d probably topped himself by now. There was no one about. I suspected that the tourists were either drunk, gone or dead.

Fire was sweeping across the harbour. Those with their own yachts had sailed off. I could see a few of them out to sea waiting for. . . what? Rescue?

The floating launch pads and business parks were dotted with the tiny specks of people. People presumably bewildered that they had been caught up in this madness.

Arken sneaked like a good’un. He’d probably been doing it all his life. He led me towards a stone wall, carved from the basalt of the island. An old wall then.

Tucked away in the corner was a battered metal door. It looked like it had been cut out from an old road sign or something. Arken creaked it open and gestured me in. Steps, leading down. This was new. Everything else on Beta Marina looked like it had been clamped on to the rock with tent pegs.

Inside, the air was cool. Certainly cooler after the heat of those fires.

Someone was going to have a lot of explaining to do. Could the loss of some stupid communications really cause this much chaos? For the first time I started to realise just how important this race was round these parts. I tried to imagine the money involved that could provoke such an extreme reaction.

Heads were going to roll. Just not mine, I hoped.

'We come here sometimes,' said Arken. Was he talking to me?

'Right.'

'Safe place.'

The steps were steep, narrow and progressively wetter. It seemed as if we were walking for miles. The walls were the same stone and worn smooth.

Who had built them? The original colonists? It must have taken some time.

And still we kept descending. 'Hold on, Arken,' I said, as my feet stumbled.

'I need a rest. Where are we going? The Earth's core?'

Chapter Ten

138

He frowned, not understanding. However, he did stop his incessant scurrying. Working in an office in London prepares one for many eventualities but hiking down dangerous slippy stones is not one of them. Another thing about travelling with the Doctor, you're always out of breath.

At last, after what only seemed like a week, I started to see lights down below. And voices. 'Safe place,' Arken repeated. He really needed someone to look at that head of his. The blood was still

trickling.

There was a final twist in the giant staircase and the whole place opened up into one vast catacomb. Water dripped from the walls to be funnelled out through holes in the floor. Could we be below sea level?

Torches glowed from crevices in those walls. It made the place look like some vast stone hydrographic project. It was a patchwork of tanks and runnels and reservoirs. I mean, this was a big place. Darkened patches revealed themselves to be tunnels leading to god knows where.

This was where the frightened natives were hanging out waiting for the fighting to cease. There must have been thirty or forty of them, busy doing whatever frightened natives do.

All right, enough flippancy. Truth is, I was glad to be out of the way of that savagery upstairs. There was something reassuring about these native Selonarts. I'd felt it before with Bloom. I don't know what it was, unless it was a feeling of innocence. There was no harm in them. God knows, if my grandparents settled me with this kind of life I think I would have had a lot of harm in me. Can't have been much of a life, growing up scrabbling about on these little patches of land, water everywhere else. And every five years the richest scumbags in the galaxy descend and make you wait on them hand and foot. The Earth race-relations policy left a lot to be desired.

Innocence. They did seem like children. Wise children. Had no one ever bothered to work out how they could look so different in just a few generations? None of the Selonarts here were as odd-looking as Bloom but they still stood apart. You couldn't have mistaken them for any other race.

I think I, along with everyone else, had been overlooking these people.

Certainly the fact that they knew of the existence of this hideaway meant there really was more to them than waiting at tables and washing up.

Arken led me across the network of stone bridges to the largest clump of Selonarts. The men, women and few children seemed content enough. Many were actually bathing in the pools around them. The cavern rung with their oddly flattened voices. Laughter, something I hadn't heard in a long time.

More refreshing than a vodka and orange.

'Whalen,' said Arken. A man turned. Older, more like Bloom. A scar ran livid and pink from temple to lips. He smiled and again I was reminded of the worried giant we had met on the yacht.

'You are Anji,' he said. I didn't know if it was meant as a question. 'Friend of Bloom.'

For some reason, I felt tears prick at my eyes. It had been a long time since I'd felt any words of real, unmediated kindness. 'Pleased to meet you, Whalen.'

'Whalen, yes.'

'Bad on surface,' said Arken. 'Stay for while.'

Whalen nodded. 'Not much stuff for you, Anji. But please stay with us.'

Here I started crying for real.

'Tell me about Bloom,' I asked, when I could control my sobs. 'He seems very special to you. To all of you.'

We were sat on mattresses, clean mattresses, stacked neatly inside a small honeycombed stone room just off the main cavern. Whalen had lit candles and a strange scent pervaded the air. No smoke though. Ventilation. Another clue that this place was no natural structure. Arken handed me a stone bowl containing some highly spiced but delicious vegetables. It was ages since I'd eaten properly.

Whalen was seated, propped against a wall. He can't have been more than forty but he seemed to have the status of village elder down here. He seemed to think for a moment. 'Bloom. Bloom is my friend. We friends long time. Go to ocean together. Sometimes I think I know him, sometimes . . .' He sighed.

'His is not the easy life. Every race Earthers come for him, to sail their boats.

Not happy in himself. Always he look beyond. He sad, he need something but Whalen cannot help. He look out to sea. Bloom is. . . strongest of us all.

He is man of the sea, I think.'

'Man of the sea?'

'We all feel the pull of the oceans. Bloom most of all. He lives long time.'

Parents of Selonart, grandparents too.'

'How did you know about me?'

'What Bloom know, often we feel.'

Arken licked his fingers clean of the stew. 'See pictures. I see Bloom and Fitz-Earther earlier on. They chased. I see Bloom and I see what Bloom see.'

Chapter Ten

140

Then Whalen see what Arken see.'

'It's incredible. Has no one wondered how... how you came to be like this, so quickly?'

Whalen and Arken seemed supremely disinterested. Whalen chuckled and a warm feeling spread through me. Strangely enough, I envied his calm.

'Why would anyone want to know? Who would want to be Blockhead?'

'Right. Let's leave it for now.' Beyond me. 'Let's talk about this place. Did the colonists, your ancestors really build it?'

Whalen shook his head. 'No, no. Earthers come, our families. They find this place, start writing the studies about it. But I think they get bored and all studies get lost somewhere. Earthers always bored. Need race on ocean.'

Like ocean not enough for them already.'

I traced my hand down one of the smooth walls. 'Incredible. So someone else built them. It feels old. Ancient. Someone who lived on Selonart centuries ago. I wonder what they looked like.'

I'm a sucker for all that, you see. Time gone; other lives lived. When I was a kid I used to think it was all still going on, somewhere or other. Imagine the people that would have sat in this very spot, all that way back in time. I grew out of it, of course, like I was supposed to. Until I met the Doctor and he showed me that it was all true. Maybe that was why I liked being with him so much. With him, anything could be true.

'I had been wondering,' I said. Whalen looked confused. 'These stone towers, there are only two of them, aren't there?'

Whalen nodded. 'Earthers call them Alpha and Beta. Both to us are home.'

'You realise of course that geologically they don't stand up to examination. They are ridiculous. Surely whatever investigation the Earthers made worked that one out.'

Whalen held out his hands. 'If they knew, they not know now. Don't affect race, that's all they care about.'

Something was brewing in my brain. Some itch that made me think that being down here was important. That this place was more than just some refugee centre for disillusioned natives. I wasn't the Doctor, and the brain wasn't going to leap to conclusions but if I waffled enough, maybe the answer would come.

'Not a natural structure. . . ' I muttered. I traced my hand over the walls again. 'How big is this place?' I asked.

Chapter Ten

141

The Governor's phone rang again. As he had done all day, he ignored it.

Instead he wiped away his tears and poured himself another vodka mix. He was spent.

There were no chairs left unbroken in his suite, nothing left unbroken in fact. All that was left was to sit in this mess of his own making.

No there was one more thing to break. The phone.

Already Marius could envision the shuttle on its way to Selonart. The

dark, grim-faced men from Central come to ‘expedite’ him from office.

Well, how was he to know the town would erupt into madness? How could he have controlled these mysterious blackouts? If only he could get his hands on those responsible. Those who had ruined his career.

He stood up, ripped out the phone from its cord, walked slowly out to the balcony and hurled it down on to the ruined town below. ‘Swine!’ he bellowed. ‘You mob!’

It wasn’t his fault, he had to keep that clear. It wasn’t his fault.

Minutes passed. Marius had a quick panic attack as he thought too much about his future; an attack that consisted of trying to climb up the walls and screaming. After that, he just drank the vodka.

He had to get away, had to run. But where could he go? The mob would tear him apart if he showed his mascara-running face down there. He was trapped. All he could do was wait for his executioners, so he had another panic attack, which dwindled into heartfelt sobs.

It was a conspiracy, that was clear. A conspiracy aimed directly at him; carefully planned and intricately managed. There had to be a lot of them.

A hundred, maybe. All out for him, all knowing even when the race began.

The whole regatta in fact had been designed deliberately to show him up and oust him from office. Well, he wasn’t done yet. Oh no. Not Governor Rakh Marius, the pride of the Imperial Sports Marketing Ministry. Someone was going to pay.

‘Having troubles?’ A familiar fruity voice. A voice of hope.

Count de Vries strolled into the room (a room that Marius had barricaded, just after realising his tiny police force was doomed). ‘Oh dear,’ said De Vries.

‘Rather a mess in here.’

‘Thank god,’ moaned Marius. ‘Thank god...’

It was a good quarter of an hour before the Count could prise the Governor off from his now tear-sodden robes.

Chapter Ten

The Count was smiling as he poured himself a drink. ‘Come now, Governor,’ he said softly. He seemed detached from the whole situation. ‘It’s not as bad as all that.’

Marius stretched an arm out to the window. ‘What are you talking about?’

he shrieked. ‘I’m bloody ruined!’

‘Not your fault. How could you think that?’

‘They’re all against me.’

‘Who?’ the Count seemed amused.

‘Everybody! Oh god, what am I going to do?’

The Count looked at him. Stared at him. ‘Save the day. Act like a Governor is supposed to act. I have already taken. . . steps.’

Marius blinked away fresh tears. ‘Steps?’

‘The communications blackout is clearly a deliberate act of sabotage. I took it upon myself to recall the yachts. Get them back to Beta Marina as soon as possible. Before anything else happens. Although, I am afraid the Bronstein yacht has already been destroyed.’ For a second, a hint of annoyance crept across De Vries’s face. He controlled himself instantly; his mind like a steel whip.

‘So there is a conspiracy?’ Marius felt hope, like a new dawn, burst in his heart.

‘Of course there is. How else could they have trapped us like this?’

‘You knew?’

‘I told you I had been sent here for a special reason. I had hoped my operatives would manage to stifle the enemy action but even I have my limitations.’

Ah. At last. Here we go, thought Marius. Finally, someone with a straight answer. He could still get out of this with some dignity. With his life.

‘And who is the enemy?’ he asked darkly. ‘This Sabbath?’

De Vries stared out at the stretching ocean beyond. Once again, it was a glorious evening on Selonart. ‘Those who stand to gain from the destruction of the race. Those who feel they would liberate themselves from imperial law; whose arrogant presumption makes them feel this planet belongs to them.’

Marius did not understand. ‘Who’s that then?’

A trace of annoyance from the Count, once again instantly controlled.

‘Think.’

He tried. ‘Well. . . err. . . the. . . ’

Chapter Ten

143

‘Yes?’

‘The. . . ’ He looked for clues. ‘The. . . Blockheads?’ Never, surely. Those half-wits?

‘The native Selonarts,’ confirmed De Vries. ‘You see? You understand how the pieces of the puzzle now fit together?’

No, he thought. That’s stupid. That lot couldn’t organise a. . . wait a minute. Maybe that wasn’t so stupid after all. After all, Bloom was on the MikronCorps yacht wasn’t he? And now the Bronstein?

‘It is vital,’ said De Vries, ‘that you place your trust absolutely in me. You understand? Absolutely, or you are a dead man.’

He positively glared at Marius. The Governor saw the ruthlessness in his eyes, the unblinking strength. He didn’t think he could resist this powerful man even if he wanted to. Yes. Yes, the Count would get him out of this fix.

‘Of course. What do you want me to do?’

The gaze dropped. ‘Good. The right decision. I can see you are a strong leader with determination and grit. Firstly, dry your eyes. Secondly, find whatever troops you have left and exterminate the natives. There is no other way.’

‘Exterminate. . . ’

‘You must. Before they exterminate you.’

‘But how will we find them? We don’t know where they are.’

Count de Vries sipped his drink. ‘On the contrary,’ he said. ‘I know exactly where they are.’

He left the fool to formulate whatever stupid plan his tiny mind could dredge up. Then, once the Governor had left, he slipped back into the shadows and operated the transmat.

His vessel was quieter than it had been for some time. Let the engines enjoy a well-earned rest. Part sentient, it couldn’t run indefinitely without going mad. He had already driven it far past the accepted safety limits and he had work to do.

The natives were proving painful. They had retreated into the cylinder tower on Beta Marina. He still couldn’t quite work out how they knew so much. Let the Governor deal with them in his stupid clumsy manner. That was the thing about the bitplayers; you could never precisely anticipate just how far they were going to get in your way.

Chapter Ten

144

He strolled across the riveted deck, boots clanging on its ringing surface.

The noise woke up a chorus of bestial bellowing. Animal bodies bounded and crashed in their cages.

Be patient my friends, he thought. Not long now.

The strain of control was starting to wear him down. Every now and then he felt he was too stretched; doubts seeping into his mind, threatening to unravel the whole caboodle. Since the shock of losing the Warlock on the Bronstein, something he never could have foreseen, these doubts were growing.

Negotiations with the Warlocks had been unusually hazardous; they were more powerful than even his masters had suspected. He didn’t think such an inconceivable act as this would improve their already permanently foul tempers. Those dried up corpses would have made arrangements and that was what was worrying him.

He settled himself down at his bridge controls, his mind racing. The black stealth holograph was still holding over his ship. Soon he would be able to lose this costly disguise. The one thing you could never bargain on was that your opponent would be more stupid than you could anticipate.

Come on, Doctor, work it out. He smiled wryly to himself. Could it be that he was actually going to have to wait for him to catch up? There was a first time for everything.

He monitored the chronometric levels. Building, but not building fast enough. The calculations were precise and immense. Without the Warlocks'

arcane knowledge they would have been impossible.

The Warlocks again. There it was, inside him. How much did they suspect?

What could they know of the greater scheme? What were they *planning*?

Time to become active. Time to move. Time.

He activated the engines again, hearing them complain. It was an irony, he noted jovially, that it was time that was running out, not knowing how exactly he had mirrored the Doctor's own thoughts.

Chapter Eleven

They saw the plumes of smoke from Beta Marina when they were still more than an hour away from it.

The Doctor could see how tired Kallison and the two others were. They weren't going to be meeting whatever new challenge was up ahead on their best behaviour. He had been hoping that Anji had somehow miraculously succeeded in the task he had set her and the evacuation of Selonart was going to be easy.

In reality it appeared that someone thought otherwise. Guilty, he just hoped the burning of the Marina hadn't been Anji's, and by association, *his* fault.

An early morning mist spread a smoky pall over the unbroken ocean, over which their dark shadow passed like some angular insect.

'Looks like the good people out there don't react well to communications blackouts,' said Major Kallison. She and Bloch and the pilot were stretching and fidgety after two more days cooped up in the helijet. An echo of the similar and more serious neuroses caused by the unique conditions of living on Selonart. No matter how prettily you dressed it up, being stuck on Beta Marina was ultimately the same as being marooned on any desert island.

'Circle the palace,' ordered Kallison. 'We need to land.'

They passed the landing pads and saw the desperate people waving up at them. Everything that could get off the ground had gone. And without navigation tools, that would not have been much. The Doctor wondered whether they had been able to reach orbit. These imperial shuttles placed too much trust in their gadgetry. Style over content.

'Waiting for rescue, the Doctor mused.

'That's a turn up,' Kallison replied. 'Standard thinking would have been that rescue would be from orbit down to the planet.'

'It's possible that the comms blackout has made the situation worse up there than it is down here.'

'And we still have no idea how it happened.'

145

Chapter Eleven

146

'Oh I have an idea,' said the Doctor 'I just don't know how to do anything about it.'

'Look,' snapped the pilot suddenly. He jabbed a thumb downwards. He was curling the helijet round to the blind side of the island.

Bloch opened the side door and stared down. The Doctor could just see a small black boat moored off the far side of the basalt cylinder.

'Sabbath.' The Doctor was surprised. Could even this be part of his arcane scheme? Was he supposed to find him here?

'At last,' hissed Kallison. 'Bloch, arm up the AG missiles. We're going to finish this once and for all.'

‘Not yet, Major.’

‘I’m tired of playing cat and mouse. He’s down there and we can stop him.’

‘And what if you make the situation worse? What if you destroy any chance of getting the communications back? He may even have abandoned and booby-trapped the boat, expecting us to try this very thing. We could end up with another nuclear explosion, taking out the boat, us and the Marina.’

Kallison thumped the frame of the helijet in frustration. Down below, Sabbath’s boat seemed to be looking up and mocking them. ‘We can’t just do nothing!’

‘I am not doing nothing. Pilot, take us over the roof of the palace. It looks like the entrances are sealed.’ He raised his voice to try to summon up enthusiasm. ‘We make a dramatic entrance and busk the rest. Are you with me?’

The soldiers’ expressions revealed that they were somewhat less than en-thusiastic.

He had never expected the palace to be empty. He had expected some trouble, some obstacle. It would have been welcome. It would have implied that there was still some structure on Selonart. And as far as he remembered, the Governor was now on their side.

The Doctor strode through the deserted rooms followed by a somewhat more cautious Major Kallison and Bloch. He tried to maintain a sense of purpose but in reality he didn’t know what he was looking for. The comms blackout seemed to be truly global.

Kallison sent Bloch off to check the entrances, to try to find somebody who knew what was going on.

Chapter Eleven

147

Despite its lack of personnel, the palace was largely untouched by the smoking anarchy outside. Apart from the Governor’s own quarters, which looked like someone had let off a grenade inside. Shattered glass and office furniture lay dead all around.

The Doctor wondered whether the Governor’s own staff had turned on

him. The way he acted it would not have been a surprise.

‘So, what now, Doctor?’ asked Kallison.

He stopped to consider. ‘This planet has broken down. Someone must try to restore order.’

‘And who did you have in mind?’

He smiled. ‘You, actually. Running planets isn’t really my kind of thing.

And you have some authority in these parts. It’s time for you to go over-ground, Major.’

Kallison kicked at the rubble. ‘Easy to say when there’s no one to govern.’

‘There has to be some way of contacting off-world. There has to be.’

‘Why?’ And for the first time, he noticed a new tinge in Kallison’s voice.

She was getting impatient. ‘I’m getting tired of following you blind, Doctor. I need reasons. Why are you so worried? Why shouldn’t I just go after Sabbath now and get him to sort out this mess?’

The Doctor sniffed an empty tumbler. Alcohol. Never a good sign. ‘Reasons. . .’ he murmured. ‘Do you understand what you’re asking me, Major?’

Sabbath and reasons? You know, I don’t even know who he is. Even whether he “is” at all in the sense we understand it.’

‘Enough riddles. I know who Sabbath is. And I know who you are. I’m tired of playing games.’ The Major looked at him sternly. She unholstered her pistol. ‘I have a job to do. So far you’ve been stopping me all the way down the line. If you don’t tell me why, I’ll go and do it without you.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘I rather hoped we might take this opportunity to have a little chat. You’re here to kill Sabbath, aren’t you. That’s your job. Do you have any understanding of how difficult that will be? It may even prove impossible.’

Kallison stroked her gun. ‘Leave that to me.’

'Oh, I don't think so, Major. This planet's in enough trouble without you sticking your oar in. And I don't approve of weapons.'

'Who cares what you approve of?'

'Is it a Knights Templar thing?' he asked, wary of going too far but needing to know. 'A remnant of his original organisation, perhaps? Some little sect Chapter Eleven

148

that spends its time dedicating itself to the cause? Someone he once upset?

Origins lost in the mists of time? Am I getting warm?'

Kallison was holding on to her temper, just. 'We have a file on you too, Doctor. Through the ages, the little man who arrives in time to save the day.

I think I'm beginning to see how little.'

'Now that's being unkind. Major, we need to be friends. I just don't want to think you're just going to shoot him when we might need him.'

'I have dedicated my life to hunting down and killing Sabbath.'

'It's not him I'm worried about. If you just blast away, I don't know what will happen to you. To all of us. Please, Major. Trust me, just a little longer.'

Kallison looked away. She was shaking with emotion. The Doctor could understand it; to be this close. It would be agony for her but she had to understand.

He only hoped he was right.

At last, she turned back to him. 'All right. Until we get to him. Then I'll decide for myself what action I'm going to take. That's it.'

The Doctor smiled back at her. 'I'll take that as a yes.'

Kallison smiled back. But it was a warm smile. She could still be reasoned with. 'A very tentative yes if I were you, Doctor.'

She whirled quickly as Bloch scrambled back in through the ruined

door.

He was breathless, his tanned face paled with shock. ‘Lifts are out. I went down the fire exit. I never expected. . . never expected. . . ’

‘What?’

‘Bodies, in the reception. Some of them bullets, some were. . . ’ He shook his head, refusing to believe. ‘What made them do this?’

The Doctor grunted. ‘The usual. Greed. I wonder if Anji. . . ’ He tailed off, also refusing to believe. She would have found a way out. She knew that much.

‘But it’s quiet now?’ asked Kallison.

Bloch was staring down at the floor. ‘I never saw anything like that,’ he muttered. ‘No reason, no reason at all. . . ’

‘Corporal!’

Bloch snapped to attention. ‘Ma’am!’

‘I know you’re tired, lad. We both are. But it looks like we’re all that’s left.’

‘No, there must be others,’ said the Doctor. ‘You should find them; try to get some kind of order established. You’ll need to.’

‘And you?’

Chapter Eleven

149

‘We’ve been dancing these steps for too long. I’m going to wait.’

‘What for?’ Kallison was getting annoyed again.

‘Sabbath. I want a word with him.’

The tin door was there, just as the Count had told him. All that time it had lain in this forgotten corner of Beta Marina, just sitting there smugly.

Mocking him.

Well, that was about to change. This was, what did they call it? Payback time!

The Governor looked round at his rag-tag army. The rest of the admin staff, nervous but ready, and a handful of tourists picked up on the way. This last lot frightened Marius. He didn't want to think about how much they were enjoying themselves. Only days ago they had been respectable corporate men and women; enjoying a trip to Selonart on a colossal freebie. Now he wondered how many of them were already killers. It was true what they said: once you got the blood in your nostrils . . .

For a moment the Governor felt sickened. He felt like a puppet jerked about by some unseen operator. How easy it was to unleash the most venal instincts in a man's mind. How many more would have to die? Who was the puppeteer?

'Lock and load,' snapped one bespectacled corporate. The same one who had been after women at his party, aeons ago. The man's summer tuxedo hung in strips across his body. He snapped the breech on the automatic rifle the Governor's men had issued him. Grinning from behind his mirror shades, his face was a mask of numbing violence. He truly was having a holiday to remember.

Marius had to keep in mind the purpose of the operation. He had to remember his career. Count de Vries had been confident he could still salvage something. And nothing was more important than his reputation.

Someone yanked the tin door aside. Dank steps led down into gloom.

Yes, he thought. This is where they scurry and plot, like the little water rats imported on to Selonart from Earth cargo ships. Vermin, that's what they were. It wouldn't be murder, it would be pest control.

'What are we waiting for?' asked the mirror-shaded man. 'Let's kick some butt!'

Oh dear, the Governor would have thought in a more sophisticated time and place. Was there any need?

Chapter Eleven

from her subordinate and waved him away. She indicated the valet to pour her another fruit tea. They were apparently within three hours of Beta Marina.

Not that you could tell. All that was in view through the wide, self-clearing viewing panels was that same unbroken ocean; the blue desert.

There had been nothing for it. Once Count de Vries had come alongside in his black boat and informed her of the destruction of the Bronstein through sabotage, coupled with their own comms failure, it was obvious the race was over. There was nothing left of the Selonart Regatta.

Someone was going to pay for this mess. Sixteen billion lUs and countless man-hours spent on this boat. One of a kind, four years training and a crew selection process that made a jihad look like a hobby; all for nothing.

Obviously that *someone* was going to be that excuse for a Governor. She would pull the trigger herself.

Apart from the blackout the yacht was functioning perfectly. But what use was it to anybody? It was a very high maintenance white elephant, designed solely for the purpose of winning this race. With the race no longer functioning, well. . .

She loved her boat like a child; indeed thought of it as the child she had not been allowed to bear. A crew honed to knifelike efficiency who lived and died for its victory and it was all over.

'Increase speed,' she hissed, impatient to be back at Beta, fed up with the ocean, the boat and this whole waste of time. Smooth engines pulsed gently, increasing their whiplike velocity across the barren waves. Von's worries were not for herself and her own blighted future, simply for the yacht. The yacht.

Von looked around the bridge. Her crew were keeping their emotions well in check. Perhaps they could not comprehend that it was all over. Most would have lived and breathed nothing but the regatta since the day they were old enough to think.

A great fragile work of art, that was what this boat was. And that was what it would become, rotting in some naval museum somewhere, never having fulfilled its function; never realising its awesome potential.

The yacht lurched suddenly. Tea spilled across Captain Von's crisp laun-dered uniform. 'Report!' she barked.

'Something hit us,' replied the alert Chief, Boland. 'Had to be.'

'Get the diagnostics back on-line,' said Von.

Chapter Eleven

151

The Comp-Op looked up at her. He had been inside the yacht's electronic brain since the blackout. He shook his head. 'Nothing. No scanning equipment working, not even internal sensors.'

Von hurled the teacup at him. 'Then go and take a look. No, I'll do it myself.'

She charged off the bridge, grabbing her cap and shoving it on to her sun-bleached cropped hair on the way. 'Chief, with me.'

Boland reacted instantly, honed to physical perfection by their long training. He was unworried, or rather, if he felt anything he controlled his anxiety perfectly.

The wind was biting out here. Their speed really was incredible, almost as if the yacht was falling rather than racing. Nothing could have stopped them winning, nothing.

However, for some reason they seemed to be juddering. Long periods spent in VR simulations had accustomed Captain Von and her crew to any situation. This felt like engine trouble. Now?

Von and Chief Boland jogged across the length of the deck to the stern.

There seemed to be some kind of dull glow lighting up the rear of the yacht.

'Something snarled up?' asked Von.

Grabbing the rails they stared down over the edge. Just above the water line something was growing. Something like... like a big chewy mint sweet.

'What the hell is that?' asked Von, her composure momentarily forgotten.

'I have no idea,' replied the Chief.

'Hmm.' Von thought for a moment. 'All right, get me a rope ladder. No harm in looking.'

Major Kallison punched out the remains of the shattered window and with Bloch's arm supporting her, she lowered herself on to the roof of the reception area. The scene through the muddied plastic glass beneath her boots was exactly as her corporal had described it. With that kind of devastation in evidence, getting the remnants of Beta Marina together was not going to be easy. The savagery was extreme. How had it come to this?

On their journey down the long winding staircase bolted on to the side of the exterior lifts, Kallison had stopped briefly to look at the view of Sabbath's boat as it idled off the rock. Every instinct, every trained nerve demanded she go out there and complete the job she had been ordered here to perform. The Chapter Eleven

152

job the Service had been waiting centuries to perform. What was stopping her?

The answer was, of course, the Doctor. Apart from the fact that he was probably telling the truth about the defensive actions Sabbath would have taken, his personality was such that she found herself trusting him. It wasn't that she considered him particularly inspiring, or as awesome as she had expected, no. It was that he charmed you. The thing about the Doctor was, you just liked him. If he said x had to happen, you wanted to make it happen.

She had never met anyone like him.

For the first time in her life, when it mattered the most, Major Kallison was compromising on her orders.

She had always found the idea of the Doctor fascinating, since that day they first opened the cover of their dossier on him for her to read. The magician; the scientist. The man who always popped up.

There were countless sightings through history. Of the pair of them. The Service had had to prepare itself to accept that somehow they were outside normal human time. Part of Kallison's training had been to consider the paradoxes. That you might meet the Doctor or Sabbath before your replacement did; except in their time-line they would

have met the replacement first, had come back in time.

Obviously the Service could only move in linear time, only forward. She knew there was a department tucked away on Earth somewhere consisting of boffins who did nothing but update and try to make sense of the Doctor's haphazard timeline. There was no point in hoping for accuracy. He was mythical, and she had almost believed fictional. There was no consistency, no regularity.

The man who could change shape and save the planet. From pre-history to late twentieth-century Earth when the planet got itself invaded by just about everybody, to post-history, he was always there. The Doctor... and Sabbath.

She remembered her journey up through the fantastically complicated web of secrets that was the Service's promotion structure, fuelled by rumours of even greater secrets; the promise of uncovering primal knowledge. Until at last she had been admitted to the biggest secret of them all.

Human they said, though Kallison was unsure. The dark man. She remembered the chill when finally they told her of Sabbath's prophecy; the warning given that had united and maintained a tight conspiracy of assassins for six hundred years. The ultimate promise.

Chapter Eleven

153

'Where do we go, Major?' asked Bloch, hopelessness in his voice. All the lad's enthusiasm had drained away. Not surprising when you looked down on this ruin. A few buildings were still standing, smouldering gently. The occasional shot rang out across the evening sky. Burned boats floundered in the ruined harbour. Bodies lay broken and dull in the dust. What have we done to ourselves? Kallison wondered. Sabbath has already won.

'Major?' Bloch said again.

No. There was duty, there was what she had to do. Nothing could get in her way. Give the Doctor his chance, then be ready. They had told her she would be unlikely to survive an encounter with Sabbath, that it was more likely he would kill her before she could complete the mission. Was trusting the Doctor something like cowardice? Was she afraid to die, after all she'd been through?

'We find ourselves some weapons,' she said. 'Big weapons. And we kill Sabbath.'

The job, that was all she needed to know. The ultimate promise.

Legend stated that Sabbath had, in one sentence, become humanity's final enemy. He had said simply: 'I will end history.'

The black boat idled its way through the debris floating around Beta Marina and gently nudged the stone harbour. Its holographic screens hummed and flickered in the evening light.

A door in its side hissed open and an electronic running board extended out to the jetty. The cloaked man stepped out, surveying the damage around him.

He nodded. All was well. Strolling across the rubbish-strewn walkway he barely glanced at the few glazed humans who still waited here for rescue.

None approached him, understanding that he was not part of their salvation.

The very opposite.

The foundations had been laid. All that remained now was to act on that which he had set in motion. Behind him, inside the vessel, harsh animal voices stumbled with heavy equipment.

The Doctor would be waiting for him in the tower. The final trick, to bring him round. It would be easier if he saw reason and aided in what was planned. If he refused, for with the Doctor one could never be sure of reason, he would still be used. There were no other choices.

Chapter Eleven

154

The cloaked man walked briskly through the dead town towards the entrance to the Governor's palace. Once plush bars and hotels were now nothing but shattered looted wrecks. Metal posts, blasted bricks and glass slewed over the streets like the aftermath of some demented children's game. A blackened and smouldering police cart lay on its roof like the upturned cara-pace shed by some gigantic beetle. Bodies lay in the streets, twisted and broken like shop mannequins, dusted with the ever-present white concrete.

He sensed the smallness of this place, the colourless one-dimensionality.

Soon he would instigate a process that would restore it to true shining multi-textured brilliance. The imperial yacht, imminently to arrive, would provide the catalyst.

Oddly, despite what he had once been, the cloaked man still found humanity an odd phenomenon. So limited, yet so torn by conflict. Who could have predicted that such a little thing as his blackout could ignite such rage? He felt sadness that they should be so determinedly destructive. Violence was not pleasant to the cloaked man. He understood its necessity upon occasion, even its glamour, but ultimately again, such a small concept. Why did humanity strive so hard for those temporary material gains it valued so highly?

When there was so much waiting for those with the imagination to realise it.

People like him.

He remembered his first inklings, centuries back. Staring into the muddied Thames. When he was just a man. What was it Joseph had said, years later? ‘Stretched before us like the beginning of an immutable waterway . . .

leading us to the uttermost ends of the earth. . . into the heart of an immense darkness.’ Po-faced cove old Joseph, but knew his eggs.

Well, he had gone to the ends of the earth, to realms Joseph could not have imagined. Further than any man, living or dead.

And now he intended to go beyond even that.

Those left alive here would soon understand. He was bringing them a great gift. He was indeed bountiful.

First, however, the Doctor. The outcome of their meeting would direct his later course of action, whatever that might be. Which was why he had chosen not to use the transmat. The Doctor was up there now waiting for him and he wanted to show he had nothing to hide, no surprises to second-guess.

The cloaked man grinned. He was looking forward to the confrontation.

He had been waiting a long time. Majestically, he strode upwards.

Chapter Eleven

155

The Doctor was busying himself trying to improvise some kind of device to screen himself from the effects of the time jam. He wasn't having much luck.

The equipment in the palace stores was hopelessly inadequate, inappropriate and he didn't really know what to do anyway. Still, anything was better than just sitting around. And you never knew when one might need such a device.

Or the appearance of having such a device.

He stood up from his mess of wires and rubbed his nose. Whatever he had built certainly looked complicated and impressive. Of course it didn't work.

Never would. But it looked nice.

He flicked a switch on its side. The machine gave off a satisfying, clever-sounding hum and a few red lights jiggled about round the circuitry. 'Not bad. . . ' he said to himself. 'I suppose I could use it to make a cup of tea.'

He shrugged. 'Let's face it. Wouldn't fool a child.'

Where was Anji? That was the real question that was beginning to dominate his mind. If she was around, why hadn't she tried to contact him? Beta Marina wasn't a big place, she should have spotted the helijet coming in over the palace. He had checked the cells earlier, fully aware of the usual fate of his companions at one time or another, climbing emergency steps to check she wasn't locked up. She had to have become embroiled in the anarchy outside and was perhaps now lying injured somewhere, waiting for him. He didn't like to think of the other possibility.

What about Fitz? He had completely lost track of him. Bloom too. The more he thought about Bloom, the more he believed he had made some mis-calculation; was failing to spot something obvious. In some way, the native was crucial to the unfolding of events on Selonart. There was something about him, something. . . important. He hoped Fitz was looking after him.

The next few hours were going to be difficult. He had to keep a clear head.

The first aim, of course, was to reverse the comms blackout. A signal had to be sent to evacuate those people left alive here. They didn't have long left.

Of equal importance was to speak to Sabbath. He had to remember his opponent wasn't uncompromisingly evil, wasn't filled with nasty evil thoughts of mayhem and destruction. If there was a way to avoid bloodshed, the Doctor felt convinced that the other would pursue it. What Sabbath was was ruthless. He would consider finding a less bloody method of achieving his aims , only if it was easier for him. The Doctor would have to make him find that method, assuming he couldn't stop him once and for all.

He strode out to the balcony and looked out. Despite its luxury, there

Chapter Eleven

156

was only a certain number of times one could appreciate a beautiful sunset.

He realised he was tired of Selonart, with its unbroken palette of primary elements. Sea, sun and a bit of stone. No wonder the tourists went crazy so effortlessly.

Sabbath's boat was docked at the Marina.

The Doctor squinted down in surprise. How could he have missed its arrival? Too busy playing 'improvise the lash-up'. Was he too late to –

No. There, walking up the steps to the lobby. Swathed in a rich cloak stained purple in the blood light. That bulky grace was unmistakable.

–

So he had been right. This was all a game. Sabbath had been playing them like chess pieces the whole time. Which was a chance. Because he only would have led them here if he wanted something from them. Something negotiable.

Did Sabbath seek to use the time distortions for his own ends? That was the most logical motivation. How to withstand its effects, though. How to enter the ice without falling victim to it. Was that why he needed the Doctor's help? Surely Sabbath wouldn't have started this

process off unless he had a way to shield himself, a real working version of the pseudo-device he himself had been playing with.

More, more than that. Sabbath didn't want merely to enter the time field.

He wanted to use it, control it. The time distortion was a tool. A deliberately engineered tool.

Which meant Selonart itself . . .

He found himself out of breath. Sabbath really was a marvel. Insane, ambitious, even ridiculous, but still a marvel. How many times had they met face to face? Not many, but already Sabbath had proved himself a formidable opponent.

What did he really want? This man who had taken more from him than any other. The Doctor rubbed his chest, perhaps feeling a twinge of pain.

The heart of the matter.

There was no point speculating, there was only one way he was going to find out. They would have to talk. And quickly, before the enigmatic Major Kallison forced them into a more destructive denouement.

To keep his mind clear, the Doctor concentrated upon his primary aim.

Restore the communications systems, evacuate the planet.

After a few moments, he felt ready.

'Let him come now,' the Doctor

thought, hearing boots outside the Governor's suite. 'Ours is a race far be-Chapter Eleven

157

yond the realm of this planet. And there can be only one winner. Let him come.'

Once again, as it had done for millions of years, the Selonart sun sank gently into the sea. A last few rays of light sprayed the sky a multitude of colours, soaking pink into the high, thin clouds.

That same light glinted off the myriad facets of the gigantic, pulpy mass steering purposefully towards Beta Marina.

On the floating office park, already exhausted and bewildered ex-tourists stared in wonder at the bizarre, almost cubist mountain skimming towards them. It seemed to them as if a hundred huge yachts had been clumped together and encased in ice. Silent but for the thrust of the waves it pushed before it, the imperial yacht drifted on the momentum of engines now diverted into power for the growth of this vast new sculpture. A sculpture that seemed a parody of its own excellence.

Not for the first time, the survivors of the wreck of Beta Marina panicked.

They rushed and fought for the few boats still undamaged. Some fell or were pushed into the sea, treading water as the ice formed around their own bodies. Quickly, their panicked thrashing was quelled. Once again, shots rang in the night air.

The office park splintered as the iceberg hit. The grey doughnut tipped under the weight of the behemoth crushing it. People grabbed at tilting handrails and storm hatches. Screaming, they flailed down into the mountain's maw, feeling their bodies stretch out and separate.

One boat escaped the remorseless advance, for a while. Three men, armed and shaking, streaking away from the office park. They turned to see the mountain swallow the structure, splitting it into a thousand identical copies.

So all-consuming was the sight that they failed to notice when their own small engine failed and the build up of slushy particles around the hull began to drag the boat, and them, into the ever-patient water.

Chapter Twelve

When Whalen revealed the subterranean chambers, it would once again have been facetious of me to state that Selonart had hidden depths.

The honeycombs stretched down further than I cared to imagine. A vast network of small caves linked by a single, seemingly infinite fossilised staircase. I was looking down at a great linked city of cells, carved out centuries ago for some inconceivable arcane purpose.

Our lights were tiny atoms in the great unblinking night. Somewhere,

I seemed to hear the ocean roar. Water streamed through sluices and ducts as it must have done for millennia past. What about erosion? What about logic?

Selonart had not always been a lifeless rock.

'I can't believe the Earth survey team didn't pick up on this. I've never seen anything like it.'

Whalen nodded. 'Not find. Maybe not care.'

I turned and bent to enter one of these small crevices. A circular cave with four opposing tunnels leading off it. There must have been thousands of them here. What had they been like, these architects? Why all the symmetry?

Whalen scraped at the dark and crabby ceiling. He seemed to be looking for something. 'Mm. . . yess. . .' he muttered. Not unlike someone I knew.

Intense, curious, pre-knowing. 'Anji, look.'

I squinted up at what looked like mineral flaws in the ceiling. Marks, just squiggles really. I could make nothing from them. Scratches?

'See. . .' he stated, emphatic, seemingly engrossed.

I shook my head. 'What am I supposed to be looking at?' I squinted again in the dim electric light. Whalen was staring at me as if I should be understanding something significant. Still nothing but these flaws in the rock.

'Pictures,' he said softly. 'Pictures.'

If he said so. 'You've seen them before?' I asked. I mean, if he said he saw something in them, who was I to argue?

158

Chapter Twelve

159

'Not this one. All have them, all over city.'

City? Could it really have been one once? Where were the shops?

'What do the pictures show?' I asked. Was this something only these native guys could understand? Of course it was. They had already said how they could see into each others' experiences and that. Maybe it was a result of having been born here.

And suddenly I knew.

Oh Christ. Born here. I sensed the immensity of history soaked into this darkened cavern. The hundreds of other caverns growing around it. Immense, not only spatially but temporally as well. I felt surrounded by some vast, ancient intelligence. We were dwarfed by the artisan ship, the incredible scale.

The natives were being evolved, altered by the planet. And it was quick, however this process worked. I had mad, random thoughts, trying to grasp explanations beyond human conception: born of Selonart, the minerals and elements ingested by these natives' parents – perhaps the very air they breathed. Some tiny re-arrangement of the genetic structure and other hard science things. Not for these people the usual existential worries about meaning and existence such as the ones that plagued poor Anji. No, these guys, Whalen and Bloom and their buddies, had it all worked out for them, imprinted into them.

Selonart was preparing them for something. I searched for that word I hated but seemed unerringly accurate: Prepping. And it was a good bet that whatever it was prepping them for was what had happened to these original beings that had invented it.

Selonart was artificial. It had been *shaped*. The most stunning piece of engineering I'd ever encountered.

And what do we do with it, the cynical part of my brain insisted on reminding me? We run races on it.

I staggered. Yes, literally staggered backwards until I felt that harsh alien rock pushing into my back. Whalen looked at me, worried. 'Anji?' he whispered.

I clasped his arm. 'Tell. . . tell me. What do the pictures say?'

'Is you OK?'

'I'm fine. Just tell me. I have to know.'

Our breath was a fine mist deep down here. I was shivering, telling myself it was because of the cold. The caves seemed vibrant, knowing;

water like an echoing gunshot.

Whalen traced a huge hand across the squiggles. ‘Not all the same. Not exactly.’ He intoned the words like they weren’t his. ‘Long ago. The People, and the Big-Animals under the sea. This man, he came here with the others, long time ago, carried on the back of the Big-Animals. He sat here patient-like and waited. I see a big sun leaving; a great shadow. The darkness grows and man waits to becomes many men in one. Then, the ocean. The ocean of light.’

He kept brushing the squiggles, his mouth still moving but the sounds, the words had ceased. I waited for the spell to leave him. At last, he bowed and I swear I saw his eyes clear in some way. What was he remembering?

‘I must tell the Doctor,’ I said.

It sounded like something pretty catastrophic had hit Selonart back in those impossibly far away times. Aeons; a pretty handy word when it came to these things. I tried to imagine what Whalen had seen. Imagine these creatures, whatever they looked like, streaming patiently in through these same stone entrances I had used. Descending patiently, silently (for some reason I was sure they hadn’t been a noisy ancient race), perching themselves into their little holes, and then just waiting for the end. Trying not to think about what was going on up on the surface; the armageddon about to overwhelm them. Were these squiggles, almost idly scratched on to the ceiling, his last calm musings or a panicked need to leave some mark behind?

Something had happened on Selonart, something so total that the inhabitants had been forced to arrange for their seed to survive through genetic manipulation. A gigantic long shot to try to retain themselves and their identity by altering the bodies of anyone born on the planet. It was impossible that I could know this for sure. But I knew someone who would.

To say that my own troubles appeared petty in the face of this would not be an exaggeration. This was way beyond what I needed. I had to get to the Doctor. It didn’t take a genius to figure that whatever had wiped Selonart clean the first time, Sabbath was now in the process of trying to repeat. This was what he was after. It was up to us to stop him.

'Whalen, thank you,' I said, sincerely. I felt I was the first human they had ever revealed their secret information to. Not because of conspiracy, there was nothing like that in these natives, but because of innocence. If nothing else, the legacy of this dead race was to imbue its replacements with nothing but good.

Chapter Twelve

161

'I help Anji, I hope,' he said.

'I hope so too.'

Again more watery echoes from around the tunnels. They seemed to be getting more frequent. A frown crossed Whalen's brow.

'What is it?' I asked.

Then I heard. Those gunshot echoes weren't echoes. They were only gunshots.

We heard the screaming above the deafening noise of the weapons. Whalen and I clambered slip-sliding up those damp basalt steps, up to where my fellow species were busy wiping out those who could harm no one.

I felt the angry hot tears coursing down my face. No no no!

'Stop! Stop it!' I shrieked, until Whalen clamped a hand over my mouth and hoisted me into the shadows at the entrance back into the main cavern.

Blasts and shots and the stink of cordite assaulted my senses. But over that I still heard the laughter. Men, and women, laughing.

I struggled furiously in Whalen's grip, catching only glimpses of the massacre through the stone arches leading out to that subterranean arena. A howling man in a suit frantically reloading his rifle, unaware of his hands crisping in the heat of the weapon. A running native, his leg erupting into twigs of bone and blood as a shot brought him down. Smoke hurtling across the chamber like an early morning mist.

Whalen held me tight in an unmerciful grip. I felt his heart pounding in his slablike chest. I sunk my teeth into those fleshy fingers of his. The grip released, slightly. I stamped down on his foot and then I was

free of his well-meaning clasp.

Not thinking at all, consumed with rage, I barrelled out into the cavern.

It was fiery here, steaming with all the heat of hell. A flash exploded right beside me and stone blasted out from the entranceway I had just bundled through. A smoke-blackened oaf screeched as he spotted me.

Natives lay sprawled across the stone floor. Many were moaning and slithering around, limbs shattered and blood leaking into the water runnels. As I watched through a haze of dumb rage, two women were picking their way through them, aiming pistol shots to make the slithering cease.

The natives hadn't even tried to fight. I ran at the man who had spotted me and charged him down before he could get his rifle shot off. I cannoned into him and we both went over, him on to hard stone and me on to him.

Chapter Twelve

162

I don't remember much but I do recall a very satisfying crunching sound as I realised I was slamming my fists into his soft, doughy face.

Something hard hammered into my head and then I was lost to anything except swirling cloud and the roar of weapons. Arken's dead bleeding face seemed to gyrate out of the cloud and then a dark stain wiped everything from my mind.

'It's you then,' said the Doctor.

The cloaked man smiled, eyeing the Governor's suite as if searching for traps. 'Oh yes,' he replied.

'I hope you're pleased with yourself.' The Doctor indicated the gigantic mountain looming over Beta Marina. Its bulk heaved and rolled towards the island it dwarfed. The mass was like a giant ice spike thrusting into the sky.

Already it was twice the height of the cylindrical palace. 'What have you done?'

Sabbath laughed heartily. He roared with good humour. 'Oh Doctor.

You sound like a teacher angry with a small boy for spilling paint. You kill me, you really do.'

He turned an amused glance to the machine on the desk. 'Been building something?'

The Doctor remained absolutely still. He shook, as if containing some great and violent rage. 'A machine: Something to ward off that time distortion you've been so busy creating.'

'Oh really? And you expect me to believe that? Behave yourself. I need your help.'

'Yes, the model boat,' the Doctor replied, edging out towards the broken French windows. From below he heard something. . . like shots. 'I'd be interested to know how you got it into the TARDIS. You could have tried just asking. All this rigmarole. You know me well enough to know that I won't have anything to do with your destructive intentions.'

Sabbath looked genuinely shocked. 'Destructive? Me? Oh no, Doctor.

You've got me all wrong. What I'm doing is opening a parcel.'

'Oh really.'

'Selonart is a gift. A present to those clever enough to pull the string and unwrap it.'

'Only this present is likely to blow up in your face. Which is where I come in. Perhaps you should have looked at the age recommendation.'

Chapter Twelve

163

Once again, Sabbath guffawed, wrapped in his own good humour. 'I like playing with you, Doctor. We could extend metaphors for hours.'

'No game. Get to the point.'

'You will help me. Partly because when I tell you what I need you'll want to. And on a more tiresome level because I'll kill your friend Fitz if you don't.'

He's on my ship now. My crew are looking forward to amusing him and if I'm not there to keep them occupied they might start at any

moment. I saved his life, you know. He was halfway to becoming several shadows of his former self.' The Doctor caught a slight darkening in the furrows round his opponent's eyes.

'Clever lad, Fitz,' Sabbath continued. 'Quite unexpected when he managed to dispose of my... ally... in the way he did. With that native friend of his.'

Most annoying. I was forced to act much sooner than I had anticipated.'

'I presume you're referring to the Warlock you brought here. How could you? Even you?' The Doctor was attempting to keep the emotion out of his voice. He grasped the window frame behind his back. He felt his hands shaking. 'Whatever bargain you believe you've made with them... you'll regret it. Especially if you've got one of them destroyed. You really believe they'll just write it off as a mistake? They'll be coming for you. They should never have been released into the cosmos.'

Sabbath sat down on the desk and picked up the empty tumbler. Like the Doctor before him, he sniffed at it. 'The Governor. Have you met that idiot?'

'He speaks very highly of you.'

'Implying that he really is an idiot. Very good, Doctor. I shall enjoy working with you. We shall have... fun.'

'Is the time distortion process past the point of no return? Is there no reversing it?'

'Why would I want to do that?' Sabbath plonked the glass down and turned his attention back to the Doctor's device. 'What on earth were you trying to do with this rubbish?'

'Can the process be reversed?'

'Of course not. Soon you won't want it to be.'

Sabbath stared at the maze of wires and circuits. He coughed out a harsh laugh and flicked the switch that turned on the red lights.

The Doctor hurled himself out of the room.

A blast of energy and heat blew the remains of the French windows

out over Beta Marina.

Chapter Twelve

164

Major Kallison gaped at the impending iceberg gradually stretching its girth around the Marina. Its dull glow lit up the night sky. She was torn, torn between getting back to the palace and getting out of here a.s.a.p.

They had been scrabbling in the remains of the hotel room in which they had deposited their secret equipment. Luckily, despite some trashing, the rioters hadn't found the actual weapons stash. If they had, it was more than possible that Beta Marina would no longer exist. Now they were out, the approaching structure had them hypnotised in the street. They both knew what its arrival would spell for them.

Only when the explosion sounded and Kallison saw the debris spew out of the Governor's suite, did she find herself able to act. 'He's here,' she hissed.

'Sorry Doctor, time to act. Nothing else mattered. 'Come on,' she ordered Bloch. Kallison zipped shut her backpack of armaments. She began to jog towards the palace again.

'Major,' said Bloch. Something in his tone disturbed her. She turned to see him holding a pistol. On her. 'We've got to get out of here,' he stated hesitantly. 'Before. . . you know, W-Warner. . .' He stuttered in his fear.

'Bloch, we don't have time for this. Sabbath is here.' OK, he was only a novice but he knew what their mission entailed. And its potential cost. 'It's what you've been trained for.'

Bloch was sweating. His eyes kept darting up to the mountain. Its glow gave the Marina a lunar quality and her corporal the pallor of a corpse. 'I don't care,' he muttered. 'If we stay here we're dead.'

Kallison shook her head. 'Bloch. We are already dead. Don't you understand?'

The shakes. Bloch trembled at her words. 'No. We're leaving.' His fingers tightened on the trigger. 'I'll kill you.'

'Oh no,' said Kallison, unclipping her pistol. 'There's too much to do.'

'Stop that. I'll do it, I swear!' His voice trembled along with his body.

Kallison looked up. 'All right, Bloch. Fine. Anything you say.'

Major Kallison shot Bloch through the heart. His pistol skittered across the concrete street, spinning slowly to a halt. Kallison was off and running long before that had happened.

Close, so close. Bloom dreamed. He saw himself, big man now, big with ocean inside. He saw the island, one of the islands where he had lived, saw how small and incomplete it was.

Chapter Twelve

165

The tides pulled his body, filled his being with their water, their life. He was walking in the water, going where he belonged. Bloom smiled. Parts of his head, the parts that for so long had weighed heavy inside him were opening out, becoming channels and sluices, releasing him from hard land.

He was liquid, he was more-Bloom.

Bloom was the man. Others were chanting his name, soft and hard and both at once.

Then wrong. Voices pulling him away. One voice. Bloom. . . Bloom. . .

(no, let him go!) . . . Bloom. . .

'Bloom!'

Fitz. And he was on cold floor again, with the animal stink. Beasts chitter-chattering and shrieking. Bloom flesh and blood and no more.

Fitz looking down at him. 'Come on man,' he was saying. Bloom wanted to say, no worries, it's nice here. Dream dwindling. But back soon. Bloom tried to call it back but no good. Wish you were here.

'Bloom!'

The noise of the ship was loud and harsh. Steel bars held them in again.

Yep, this was back in the world all right.

He raised a heavy arm and clamped it on Fitz's shoulder. Bloom moaned his friend's name. Somewhere Whalen and Arken and others were shouting.

Dying.

'Glad you could make it,' said Fitz.

Bloom recalled the coming here. From the ship, the other ship. The flames and that creature of death sliding into the Selonart-growing stuff.

Bloom had seen Fitz falling through the ice. Instinctively, he had stepped in to help. Felt the warm waves surround him, felt the sliding out of himself. Head fizzed in the new places, sensed the patterns around him. Not with brain, nor eyes, nor ears. No. The new part of him, the part that was growing. The bulk of Fitz in his arms; the call to join and stay with this new growth. Was belonging.

But no. Fitz to be helped. Pulled him out. Leaving the growth was like pulling off his own arm, stepping back into darkness, into lesser world.

The cloaked man behind him; the stranger. Not Earther. Not anything.

Helping Fitz on to the next boat, the black boat. Him carrying Valeria. Blood-soaked hands. Her blood.

And then, the creatures, the animals that pawed and bit at them, throwing them into dungeon, the latest in a long series.

Chapter Twelve

166

Bloom sat up. Valeria in a corner, arm and head in bandage. Smoking the sticks again. 'What's up?' he asked her.

'Escape,' Valeria replied. 'Revenge. The old stuff.'

Fitz helped Bloom to his feet. 'You collapsed,' he said. 'Thought you'd been wounded. You missed Sabbath's inspiring speech. Looks like we're still hostages.'

'Sabbath?'

'The bad guy. The one we've got to escape from. Any ideas?'

Bloom thought. ‘Change is close, Fitz. You feel it? Bloom change.’

Fitz nodded. ‘I wish I knew what it was. You even look different. Lighter.

Thinner. I’ve got to get you to the Doctor.’

'Who cares about that dummy?' snapped Valeria. 'I want to kill the man who sent that creature on to my ship.'

'Fine, fine, Valeria,' said Fitz impatiently. 'But talking about it doesn't get us anywhere.'

Bloom went dizzy again. Seemed to see through walls of ship, see the ocean below. They were under the waterline in this metal box. Box so flimsy, transparent like sun through paper. Why, hardly any barrier at all, so easy just to slip through.

'He's going again. . . ' came Fitz's voice from that half-world. Hands on him, Fitz's hands but weak, more like a dream than the dream itself. Around, the water stretching out. Close enough to touch. Bloom sensed how easy it would be to be when the boat not here. When all would be ocean. All he had to do was push.

Bloom pushed.

I woke to realise that I was being dragged. My head was damaged, liquid was leaking out and blasts of boiling air were being hair-dryered into my brain. The pain was unbearable. I moaned.

'Anji. . . ' came a voice. 'Shh.'

Whalen. Dragging me across a stone floor. Something heavy on top of me.

Eyes that gazed, unflinching. Arken's eyes. They stared lifelessly into mine.

'I'm sorry,' I wanted to say to him. 'I tried to stop them.'

'Anji!' came the voice again, hissing. 'Quiet. You must stand. We run.'

I reached up to grab the arm hauling me along by the scruff of the neck. I had to get away from that accusing gaze. 'I'm here,' I managed. Although I wasn't sure I was here.

Chapter Twelve

The dragging stopped. I saw the distant dark roof of the cavern. Arken's body pressed on to me. Slowly, Whalen rolled it off. All was quiet in here now. I heard a few distant voices, some bellowed

commands. My brain still wasn't functioning properly. I wanted the world to make sense but it just wouldn't. I was seeing double and chewing on my own blood.

'When I say, run with me,' Whalen whispered. I saw lights and realised they were his glittering eyes. Not dead. Breath seemed to enter my lungs for the first time. 'Earthers off searching. Many of us escape into city. Still we must be quiet, oh yes.'

I nodded, sending a few nuts and bolts rattling around inside my skull.

'Yeah, yeah,' I said, spitting out the scarlet cud tacked to my teeth. 'What do you want me to do?'

'We next to pool. It leads out but you must swim. Can you swim?'

'I can do whatever it takes,' I said.

I rolled over on to my stomach. A slick of blood followed in my wake. The air was tangy with the smell of gunpowder. I hurt all over.

'We go,' said Whalen and darted away. I pushed myself up, more than a little shaky, and scrabbled after him.

Immediately I heard a vicious 'Hey!' rocket round the cavern after us.

There was a heart-stopping click of a rifle and a shot that boomed. The ground next to me burst into rock splinters.

Whalen clapped a great hand around my back and threw me into freezing cold water. Then, for a while, it was all bubbles and the roaring of my own blood. The water grabbed us and sucked us down. I had no idea where I was, up or down. Well, not until I cannoned into more rock. My feet connected with something, undoubtedly Whalen's head, and then I was sliding, like on a water slide back in a fun park back home but much, much faster. If I hadn't been so beaten up and disorientated I would probably have enjoyed it. As it was, the whole rush was a breathless nightmare.

In some ways, I was glad I was so out of it. If I'd realised what was going on I would probably have thought about what we were doing, hesitated and that would have been the end of me.

Next I remember I was up and blinking salt tears out of my face and looking up at the night sky. I coughed and puked until Whalen grabbed my head and kept me up over the waves. 'Safe Anji. Safe

now.' He kept saying the words over and over again as if trying to soothe a child.

The moon had to be up as everything seemed lit with an eerie bone-white Chapter Twelve

168

glow. My bearings came to me and I turned to face the floating Whalen. He looked like a ghost, his scar dark and livid in the light. He pointed and I saw the black imprint of the cylindrical tower. I didn't need prompting to swim for it. I just hoped I'd get there before whatever adrenalin I had left drained away.

In the end, he had to help me again and drag me over the rocks. Perversely, all I could think about was sleep and we didn't have time for that.

'What happened in there?' I asked as I gripped the nearest rock, trying to will strength into myself. It was a few minutes later when I realised we weren't alone. Natives hid in the nooks and crannies, scared and shivering.

Whalen was looking round, strong and sprightly for his age. The natives, they never seemed to tire. 'Many escape, Anji. They use pools, like us. Arken and others, they hold out. . . keep Earthers busy.'

'Arken. . . ' I remembered his busy, eager face. They had shot him down as he tried to rescue me, I'm sure. 'It was my fault he died.'

Whalen slapped my face. Shock went through me like a lightning bolt.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'Arken dead and you live. Your fault.'

At that moment I wished he too had a gun and could have shot me dead.

God, I felt rotten. 'I'm sorry,' I managed.

Whalen blinked away tears. His anger dissipated and he was back to himself again. 'Doesn't matter,' he said. 'You live. What he wanted. Anji. You must make that worth it.'

I nodded, snivelling. 'I will. I will. I promise. They won't get away with it.'

Whalen laughed, grimly. 'Earthers always get away with it.'

'Not this time. The Doctor will make sure of that. He'll be back now. I swear we will help you.'

Whalen's face darkened as he leaned down to me. The others were crawling out of their holes, looking at me. No, not at me, at something behind me.

I turned to see a gigantic iceberg, swarming and pulsing, about a mile out to sea. It was immense, stretching high up into the sky and wide, wider than Beta Marina. It looked to me like a frozen tidal wave. Whalen was smiling at it. He looked a different man. 'Maybe we not need your help,' he said. 'This is for us.' He pointed at the freakish sight and laughed. 'Us.'

'H-how do you know?' I asked, suddenly afraid of him. Of all of them.

Whalen turned to me, barely seeing me. 'Bloom. He say. He tell us.'

Battered, bloody and bruised, thought the Doctor. Not to mention distinctly Chapter Twelve

169

out of sorts. He enjoyed new experiences in the main but hanging from a balcony in the middle of the night was not one to be recommended.

Once the dust had settled (and it was interesting how many true phenomena could be encapsulated in clichés), he hauled himself back on the cracked balcony, ready for the next round.

He did not approve of violent tactics but given the time available he had really had no option. Thank heavens Sabbath was a fidgety one. Curiosity; probably the only trap he would ever fall into. He was often accused of it himself.

Still, that had been close. It had been an awful risk; could have taken the top of the building off. An electric shock mainly – wiring the device directly into the palace power supply had been simple. Making it look as if he hadn't was the hard bit.

He kicked his way through the rubble. A big jagged hole now sat happily where once the French windows had stood. Inside was worse. The room had been obliterated. One could definitely say with confidence it was now open plan. Smoke and dust hung like a tapestry over the proceedings with only one singed lump where the desk had

once nested. Sabbath.

Coughing out one of the by-products of his tactic, the Doctor staggered into the coagulating mess.

The timeberg (for one might as well call it that. A handy tag after ‘the formation’, ‘the structure’ and all those horrible misnomers) shone in a ring around Beta Marina like vast chalk cliffs. There was only one reason it hadn’t already overwhelmed the colony and that was because Sabbath had to have a real version of the machine he had pretended to make. He had Fitz too.

There was only one place to go. After, yes, a little pilfering.

The Doctor rolled the lifeless body over and went through the pockets of the cloak. Strangely serene in death, the corpse was intact. He really had been tougher than he looked. Again, the Doctor felt the loathing that always accompanied contact with this foe. Absolutely inimical to the concept of murder, it was odd how he felt so numb after this one. It was as if instinctively he understood just how anti-life Sabbath had been. Everything about his existence had felt like a violation of himself.

Odd though. The Doctor hadn’t intended to murder him. He had expected Sabbath to survive.

There it was. The small black egg. Had to be the control unit for his ship.

Pocket it, figure out how it works on the way.

Chapter Twelve

170

He staggered out of the room towards those familiar winding exterior steps. The skeleton glow of the timeberg illuminated the places where destroyed striplights could not. Disorientated, the Doctor thumped into the wall as he reached the first of the spiralling staircases. Still coughing, he started to make his way down. More dazed than he thought.

Permutations of actions swam through his mind. Free Fitz. Turn the comms jamming system off. Get the people off the planet.

There was a morbid humour in the supposition that back on Alpha

Marina, the blackout would mean the populace there probably had no idea of the devastation on their twin island. Unless, of course, the timebergs had reached them already.

A noise below. No. No more delays. He couldn't be stopped now.

The Doctor paused on the stairwell, heard the footsteps ascending in a series of metallic knocks and sat down. There was no avoiding whoever was coming up. Best save his breath and wait for them.

First, a gun. Then Major Kallison holding it. She looked pale; gone. Something had happened. Their truce was over.

'Where is he?' she asked blankly.

'I got him,' said the Doctor. 'It's done. You've succeeded in your mission.'

Well done, Major. You know, I could do with your help.'

Kallison blinked, as if unable to comprehend what he was telling her.

'Dead? Sabbath?'

He nodded simply. 'Now, if you don't mind. . . '

'Where?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Trust me. Please, we're running out of -'

Kallison stepped up. 'I have to see. Out of my way. You can do what you want but I must see him.'

He pulled on a railing and tugged himself wearily up. 'Oh, if you must.'

Meet me down in the harbour when you're done. Sabbath's boat. I'll wait for you. For as long as I can.'

Kallison brushed past him as if he wasn't there. He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. 'No, not at all. It was a pleasure,' he muttered. Her footsteps clattered into silence. 'Charmed I'm sure.'

The Doctor started again down the steps.

Chapter Thirteen

Now that was a result. At last something positive to show for all the agonies he had undergone. He imagined the pleasure of writing up the report: The native insurrection has been put down. At his hand.

They counted twenty-two bodies in all; a substantial percentage of the Blockhead population. A harsh lesson in the futility of denying his governor-ship. Leave them there to rot a warning to any others who dared defy his rule. Justice had been done, and been seen to be done.

Governor Marius swung his rifle nonchalantly. A good weapon, a trusty weapon. This was how it all should be: lone justice, a man standing up for himself, taking back what was rightfully his.

The group was silent now, deafened by the sound of their slaughter. Many a corporate ear was bleeding. The Governor himself could hear nothing but a persistent ringing, as if of victory bells.

They made their way back up the steps to the Marina. Marius hoped someone would ask him why they were smoke-blackened and bloody; he would be able to reassure them, to tell them manfully that **EVERYTHING WAS GOING**

TO BE ALL RIGHT.

He climbed out into the oddly glowing night. He took sweet gulps of the fresh, salty air. It felt good.

Many of the others were already drunk but Marius was not going to be swayed from his duty at this late stage in the game. He wanted to tell Count de Vries of his battle. The rebuilding of the planet was going to start here and now. ‘Right, men,’ he bellowed, hearing his words only as a dull fuzz.

‘Your names will be remembered for this night’s work. However, there is much to be done. Order must be restored!’ He raised a bloody finger in the air for effect. ‘Who’s with me?’

The silhouetted group looked round at each other. Marius saw drooping, flushed faces; the afterglow of violence. They muttered words he was too deaf to hear.

He coughed and yelled again, ‘I said: WHO’S WITH ME?’

The corporate man, the one whose spectacles were now daubed with thin red smudges, waved an indignant hand at him. He turned and sauntered away. Others, laughing and slapping backs, followed him. Bottles flashed in the night sky.

'Now just you wait a minute,' snapped Marius and strode up to his retreat-ing back. He jabbed a finger into that back. 'You owe me!'

A pistol appeared under his jaw. The man in glasses smiled and breathed alcohol into his face. 'Really?' he mouthed.

Marius remembered the cavern, remembered how this Exec or whoever he was had screamed and capered with the violence. How he had sweated and laughed and whooped and cheered and fired at anything that moved.

'Or . . .' he said, 'you could go and take a well-earned drink.'

The pistol disappeared. Marius felt a dull pain in the groove under his chin where it had been. The man in glasses nodded, still smiling, and turned away contemptuously.

Well, thought the Governor, there's one who won't be mentioned in my report. In fact, I might just see to you, sonny Jim. Later.

Furious, Marius could only watch as the posse stumbled down the hill.

Scum. Vigilante scum. Without his glorious leadership they were nothing.

All right, he would take all the credit himself. They had had their chance.

Why could no one just do what they were told? He felt his jaw quiver, his eyes burn with tears. Something of what he had done this day came home to him. Oh god.

He needed someone to reassure him, tell him he had been right. He needed to see the Count.

Only when he wiped his eyes did he notice the giant ring of glowing ice round Beta Marina. What in the emperor's name was that?

The Count. With a sinking feeling in his empty stomach, he realised he'd been put out of the way.

Kallison stepped round the body on the floor. Her mission, the task that had been anticipated for centuries, had been completed. And none of it was the Service's doing. 'D' had been correct, the Doctor did have an important part to play. The most important.

However, it was up to her to complete what he had not. It was too easy; far too easy. Sabbath wouldn't just lie down and die no matter what appearances were to the contrary. She was going to make sure.

Chapter Thirteen

173

It wasn't that he wasn't dead, he certainly was. It wasn't going to be as simple as popping a bullet into his head. No. If he could come back from whatever had killed him now, Kallison doubted such a tiny coup de grace would make any difference.

What she was going to do was obliterate him. Annihilate the body. Bring down the Governor's palace entirely. Three fusion mines would do.

As she worked, Kallison felt a strange new sensation coming over her.

What was it? Release?

Having never expected that she would be called on, the Service made that clear at initiation, the burden of her duty had started to overwhelm her. She could see that. Sorry Bloch, it all got too much. She acknowledged that she had gone a little mad. However, there had always been that itch with her, that knowledge that one day the call might come and she would have to sacrifice herself in the assassination attempt. She had been immersed in a conflicting, complicated undercurrent composed of anticipation and dread and fatalism. One that she never expected would be resolved.

Next time she saw the Doctor she would have to thank him for his action.

But not yet. There was still much to be done.

Six-hundred-metre range should allow her to get down to Sabbath's boat.

She primed the pliable little ball in her hand. The *Jonah*. A valuable addition to the Service's armoury. After which she would resign. Why

not? There was no reason for it any more.

She clamped the third mine to the floor. Handy little beasts, smaller than a golfball and with intelligent timers. Only when her life-signs had moved out of its range would the first one decide to blow, triggering the others in its wake. Its sensors were triple-shielded and the short range meant their scans were just operational in the blackout. No mistakes. Sabbath would be nothing but ash. And her job would finally be done. Again, a wave of something like panic, something like awe washed over her. Finish the job, she thought. Finish it.

'What are you doing?' came a voice from the ruined doorway. Kallison knelt. Slowly, her hand moved to the pistol in her lap.

The voice, a male voice, was wavering, cracking with emotion. Someone else pushed to the edge by events here. Probably some scavenger with ideas of coming up for a good old loot. Once again, the steel shutter of duty crashed down in her mind. If he didn't have her at such a disadvantage he would already be dead. How to get control?

Chapter Thirteen

174

'I said: what are you doing?' The voice again, higher pitched and tight.

'Don't worry,' said Kallison, as calmly as she could muster. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

'Turn around. Now!'

Kallison released her grip on the pistol and eased it back into its holster.

She raised her arms and stood.

The man holding a rifle on her had to be the Governor. She recalled Anji's description of him as a clown and she wasn't far off the mark. Only now he was a dishevelled, bloody and distinctly tearful clown. Ridiculously ornate robes of office were hanging like filthy sheets off his plump body. What looked like smeared paint was smudged across his face. A tight orange perm laced with grime and blood completed the job. Kallison had half a mind to start laughing at this pathetic wreck. Except for that gun he held shakily at her.

'I am Major Kallison of the Imperial Security Service. . . ' she started to say before he interrupted her.

'The Count!' he said, disbelieving. 'He's dead!'

Kallison nodded. 'Yes, and just in time. Look, you'd better get out of here.'

'You killed him! He had to save me!'

'No. Not me. I should inform you of the situation -'

The rifle barked once. Kallison felt something ram into her stomach. A force that picked her up and threw her into the cracked wall behind her.

He shot me, she thought as white pain blazed through her abdomen. The bastard shot me. . .

She slid down the wall, feeling the world swirl around. The Governor was looking down at his hands, as if not believing that he had fired. Blood filled her mouth in a hot gush and suddenly it was impossible to breathe. Bands of pain tightened around her chest and stomach.

'Mines. . . ' she gasped.

The Governor was staring at her. Oh you stupid sod, she tried to moan but the words wouldn't form any more.

'No, he was mine,' he said. 'And you ruined everything.'

Kallison coughed once, then vision was gone. Oddly, she felt relief. Sabbath was dead. He was dead. She had succeeded. It had to be worth it. And then all thought was gone except the pain in her guts.

You know folks, this hadn't been the most pleasurable of excursions for me. I Chapter Thirteen

175

was becoming very impatient, building up lots of the old pent-up aggression.

Valeria wasn't much help, she was always aggressive, but at least she had decided not to kill me any more. Which was nice.

As for Bloom, I couldn't figure out what was up with him. I was

beginning to suspect though, what with his being able to stroll through the time jelly stuff and doing all sorts of new crazy things I'd never thought he was up for.

Right now, what he was up for was lying contentedly on the brig floor and stretching. Yeah OK, I felt like saying, there's a time and a place.

Sabbath's boat was like some old-fashioned brass and steel Earth naval vessel. It would have seemed antiquated in 2002. But for the strange hum of the engines and a few choices of less than discreet technology tucked away here and there, you could have been forgiven for thinking you were back in the Victorian British navy.

What was it with Sabbath? Where was his head at?

Valeria, as you can imagine, was supremely unworried about Bloom. She just kept peering through the little porthole in the hatch and cursing. Even she couldn't see a way round getting past a crew consisting of very large and very aggressive killer apes.

Apes! Like you I had found the notion quite funny. Apes as crew? Come on. . .

Until you saw them, as I had before, and realised that they were very big and they really did want to crack open your skull then rip you to pieces. And eat you.

Must have cost Sabbath a fortune to maintain them as his crew. The smell was bad enough even though I'd only been aboard a few days. How about *all the time*? Imagine the cleaning bills. Despite my mounting frustration, I was not going to try to take them on in a hurry. And believe me, how that frustration mounted.

Never been my style, you see, playing the hostage. Embarrassing apart from anything else, and on Selonart that seemed to be all I did. I mean, didn't people have better things to do than, chase me, lock me up and give me a good kicking? I *can* do other things! Time to take the initiative.

Question was: how?

'Stop wandering about!' Valeria snapped as I banged my fist on the brig's metal wall for only about the eightieth time.

'What about Bloom?' I asked. Apart from his weird stretching exercises, he had also gone very quiet. Nothing new there but this was

uncommunicative.

'Forget that Blockhead,' she said back. 'He can't get us out of here.'

Now, I liked Valeria and everything, but there was no excuse for that.

Bloom had, of course, saved my life and I owed him. I decided to release some of that pent-up aggression on her. Purely verbally you understand. She could have snapped my back and poked my eyes out quicker than I could raise a fist if I had decided to travel down the more tempting but foolhardy route. I let out a few choice Fitz-isms.

What prevented actual bloodshed, I believed, was the siren going off.

ALARM!!

Blooming thing almost deafened me. The lights switched to red and swirly and the apes outside went ballistic. They roared and hammered at the ship's fittings.

Valeria pressed her face into the porthole glass. From the movement outside, I guessed it was time to pay or play. 'They're coming,' she said simply.

Now, I'm not known for my caution but even I could tell that two unarmed people were not enough to overpower even one of these animals, let alone an angry pack. Still, what option did we have? 'If you've got a plan, Valeria,'

I said pleasantly, 'now's the time.'

She leaned back against the wall and smiled. 'How about you distract them; nobly sacrificing yourself to allow me to slip out the back?'

'Oh right,' I said. 'That'll work.'

The hatch was pulled on the other side. The apes were screeching with anticipation and blood lust. Whatever else the alarm signified, it mainly signified the end of us.

Bloom was still prostrate on the floor. 'Come on,' I yelled at him. 'We need you here.'

Valeria braced herself to keep the hatch wedged shut. Clearly, when the apes really started shoving she wasn't going to keep them at bay. 'Fitz,' she said calmly, 'I need you here.'

Bloom raised an arm. He looked strange, almost melting away. I dashed over to pull him up when I realised how flimsy, how liquid he seemed. Like a man projected on to a sheer pool of water. In the red light it was difficult to tell.

His eyes were bright. He was smiling. 'Fitz,' he said.

'What's wrong with you?'

Chapter Thirteen

177

'Nothing,' his voice was serene, distant. 'All well. You'll see. Friend, goodbye.'

What? 'Bloom! Bloom!'

His grip on my arm loosened and the hand fell away. How could – was he dead?

The apes were pounding at the hatch. Valeria rocked with every blow.

Something snapped in me. I'd had enough. Bloody boats, I was sick of them. Also, I was heartily sick of being beaten up. Well, no more. Time to fight back.

'Let them come,' I hissed. 'I'll hold them off long enough to give you a chance.'

She snorted. 'Yeah, right.'

Two things happened at once. Firstly, in front of me, the hatch finally burst open, sending Valeria piling across the brig. I saw massive mouths, ugly yellow teeth and stinking grey fur. The stench of their breath nearly took my head off.

Secondly, there was a tremendous splash behind me and a roar of what had to be the ocean. The apes' triumphant squeals turned to howls of fear and suddenly a torrent of water blasted over us straight at the hatchway.

And the water kept coming. I ducked down under it. The scalding jet

was like a solid wall of water pumped from some insane high-pressure hose. It scattered Sabbath's apes like pins in a bowling alley. What had happened?

What had Bloom done?

He was nowhere to be seen; just a mass, a vertical wall of water. The brig was suddenly filled with the smell of breezy flowing open water. Invigorating. Like an ocean. The wall was growing, expanding.

Valeria plucked at my arm and squeezed me tight. She was just staring and I don't think I'd ever seen anyone so beautiful in my life. I held her just as tightly back as this miracle scoured the boat in front of us.

Still, this couldn't last. We had to use whatever time Bloom had given us, for I felt certain this was Bloom's doing. 'We have to go!' I shouted. I pointed at the flooded doorway, the water still blasting through it. She clutched my arm harder.

'Hang on!' I yelled, exuberant suddenly. This was certainly going to be an experience.

'What are you going to do?' Valeria asked, shocked.

'Jump!'

Chapter Thirteen

178

And I did.

Memories. Memories of a past time. And if Sabbath had had his way memories of the present and future too.

To the Doctor's tired mind, the mountainous ring round Beta Marina embodied the monolithic submerged mass of memories buried inside himself.

The mess and jumble that lived within him.

A faint glow over his head revealed that the phenomenon was stretching out a thin sheet of ice over the top of the Marina, sealing it inside a big dome of finite time. A last doomed outpost of what once was.

Memory. He had done so much, lived such a long time. And this

mountain ring was not a symbolic mass, not if used correctly.

The timeberg was literally a means of breaching the barriers between past and future, between space and time. No wonder Sabbath thought he could get the Doctor on his side. He was beginning to see what kind of scale his dead opponent's ambition had encompassed. The physical embodiment of infinity. Not to be sniffed at. Except it would drive any man mad who was caught up in it.

How could such a force exist? A natural phenomenon? How likely was that?

Sabbath's black-screened ship bobbed gently against the stone jetty. In the water. The Selonart ocean, that strange soup. A cauldron of raw mineral ingredients waiting for a chef with the correct recipe book. You've got the water, just add energy. Masses of energy.

The Doctor was thinking about the brief previous visit he had made to this vessel. He had never thought he'd go back. The *Jonah*, with its bestial guardians. Killer apes. The Doctor allowed himself a chuckle. For all his urbanity Sabbath was capable of surprising lapses of taste.

He fumbled the control unit from his pocket and stared down at it. Very well, he thought. Here we go.

'Doctor?' cried a tired and bedraggled voice. A voice he hadn't heard in a long time.

She was walking slowly and unsurely along the jetty. Her left arm was dangling uselessly by her side. Her face was caked with blood, stained a dense black in the timeberg's glow.

'Anji!' he shouted and ran to her. Immediately he was fussing over her arm

– bullet graze, painful but not damaging, and face – deep cut on the cheek, Chapter Thirteen

179

more serious. He slipped the control unit away and produced a small brass tin containing a powerful healing salve. He dabbed a little on to his finger and rubbed.

Anji held on to his shoulders and sobbed.

'It's all right,' he said, soothing both face and emotions. 'You're back. Back now.'

'D-Doctor. . . ' she managed. Her words were a heaving jumble. 'I couldn't do anything. . . they started shooting. I tried to stop them. I've messed everything up!'

He smiled, looking into her eyes. 'Anji. Whatever happened, you would have done your best. I know that. Trust me, I sincerely know that.'

She blinked away tears. A twinge of conscience: he really put his companions through it, didn't he? He would have to change his ways. And with the situation the way it was, there were lots of ways that were about to change.

Gradually, Anji regained control of herself. The Doctor led her to a ruined wall on the side of the jetty. He sat her down. There was no rush now. 'Tell me what happened,' he said.

When Anji was finished, explaining about the natives and the massacre and the ancient catacombs, the picture finally came clear.

The Doctor found himself chuckling again. The air was warming up, heralding another Selonart morning. Perhaps its last.

Anji looked at him as if he had gone insane. 'What's so funny?' she snapped.

He took a deep breath. 'Nothing really. Just that Sabbath was right. He was opening a present.'

'Huh?'

'Selonart is a gift. A gift from the race that terraformed it.'

'But there was a terrible catastrophe,' Anji insisted. 'The race was destroyed.'

'Oh no. Nothing like that. They wanted it to happen; they made it happen.'

He looked up at the stars and satellites glinting through the thin skein of gleaming ice. 'A race that must have reached the limit of temporal existence.'

It was no longer enough for them. A deeply philosophical and gentle

race.

You said it yourself, the natives are gentle, thoughtful creatures. And Bloom, always needing more from his existence, sensing how trapped he was in his body.'

'I don't understand.' Anji remained forlorn. 'How can you know this?'

Chapter Thirteen

180

'The ultimate dream, to join directly with the universe yet retain your sense of self. To transcend even death. To know everything. That's what Selonart was built for, to allow that process to happen. It even prepares the way genetically for the body to cope with the new insights. Incredible.'

Suddenly, he reached down and picked up a handful of rubble. Gently, he picked out chunks of concrete until all he held was granules of the basalt rock. 'This isn't an island. It's an antenna, the fossilised remains of that raw matter out there. The race must have entered it and bedded down, waiting for their physical forms to, I don't know, melt away. To enter infinity.'

He stared at the dust in his hand, before slowly letting it slip through his fingers. They sat there, staring out at the glowing ring.

'Soo. . .' said Anji, clearly trying to take all this in. 'What did Sabbath want with it?' A new thought struck her. 'Where is Sabbath, anyway? Shouldn't we be rushing off to do whatever it is we've got to do?'

The Doctor felt sadness weigh him down. 'Anji. I killed him. I didn't know what else to do.'

He saw her trying to suppress a satisfied smile. 'I'm sorry,' she said insincerely. 'But shouldn't we be off reversing the polarity or whatever it takes to stop this process happening?'

'I can't.'

'What?'

'I don't believe it can be stopped now. I'm not sure that we should.'

Anji was clearly stunned by this. 'But. . . but, if Sabbath wanted it to happen, then it must be, like, a bad thing.'

'Not necessarily. The natives are obviously looking forward to it. Down on those rocks, waiting to be transformed out of this pretty miserable life they've been leading. You know, I envy them. They're the ones this was all designed for. Sabbath just set the process off too early. I hope they're ready for it.'

How many generations does it take before you can withstand the effects, I wonder?'

'And everyone else?'

'We just need to get into Sabbath's ship and switch the jamming signal off.'

End the comms blackout and wait for rescue. There must be a device on board to keep the effects at bay long enough for us to leave. When we've gone, the planet will do something, not quite sure what, but something that moves it into an... existence far out of our reach.'

Anji pondered this. How long would it take her to figure out the obvious?

Chapter Thirteen

181

'But that means... ' she started, the facts slowly dawning on her. 'We won't... we won't be able to get the TARDIS back.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Indeed. Whichever way you look at it, our lives are going to be transformed as well.'

Marius looked down at the woman's twitching body. She kept moaning and spewing blood but was clearly dying.

Let her die. Let her death be slow and agonising. It would provide his last entertainment before his inevitable ruin. At least there was one person left worse off than him.

At last, Marius understood the contemptible figure he was. All the time they had been laughing at him. Even when they gave him his position here they were mocking him. They knew it would end in disaster.

He was alone, alone in the world. It wasn't fair, he was only a marketing man trying to excel in his job. What had he done to deserve

this?

Count de Vries had been his last hope. Now all he would have was the massacre and how was that going to look? He dropped the rifle from his nerveless fingers. Ruined, everything ruined. Perversely, even the body of the Count sprawled across his suite seemed to mock him. Why couldn't you have stayed alive, you bloody fool? Just long enough to save me. He began to sob once more, lost in self-pity.

The fingers of the Count's right hand began to move. Marius caught himself mid-sob.

It was the strain, had to be, the man was clearly dead. Fair enough, retreat into madness; that was all he had left.

No. The fingers were definitely moving. The body was shifting, becoming straighter.

Life entered the Count. His bulky chest began to rise and fall. He groaned, a deep vibrating sound.

Marius could have got down on his knees and prayed. A white intoxicating light filled his brain. A miracle. A real, down-to-earth honest-to-goodness miracle! Thank you god, oh thank you! I'm saved!

Count de Vries coughed twice. He blinked and pushed himself up off the singed carpet. He turned and the rage in his eyes sent Marius cringing back to the entrance way. There was something in those eyes, something black and alien. Like the Count had someone inside him forcing him up. 'You. . . '

he hissed. A deep croaking voice.

Chapter Thirteen

182

'I. . . I thought you were dead,' Marius replied, his own voice nothing more than a squeak.

'Ha!' barked the Count. He touched his fleshy face. 'How delicious. . . the bargain. . . '

'B-Bargain?'

De Vries smiled, cruel and cold. 'The Warlocks, you fool. Oh Doctor, nice try. Very close, very close indeed.' He glared at Marius. 'Where is

he? Where is the Doctor?’

Marius was rigid, terrified. ‘I don’t know. Haven’t seen him since –’ He looked away, down at the woman on the floor. ‘She did it, I thought. Tried to kill you. Thank god you’re back.’ His words were a babble, a torrent now.

‘You can tell them I was acting under orders. I did what you said, wiped out the Blockheads. They won’t be rebelling now, I can tell you that.’

The Count seemed to be barely listening. ‘What are you talking about?’

Who is this woman?’

‘We’ll be heroes,’ said Marius, unable to stop himself. ‘I’ll make sure of that. She came to kill you. Was up to something.’

De Vries was staring at some little plastic objects on the floor. Three of them, like grey marbles. ‘Indeed.’ He glanced at the body again and smiled.

‘We need to get off-planet,’ said the Governor. ‘Get a report written. Save the day.’

‘Oh, I don’t think so. You see, when that woman eventually dies these mines will activate. And I don’t think she’s got long left.’

At last, the warmth came back into the Count’s face. He smiled at the Governor. ‘You’ll need to hurry.’

‘Eh? What about you?’

The Count pressed lightly on the jewelled ring adorning the middle finger of his left hand. The ring beeped once. ‘Oh, places to go. People to see. Good luck.’ He paused. ‘In fact, no, not good luck. A fool deserves everything he gets.’

He pushed a thumb down on the ring. A shimmer, a hum of energy and then Count de Vries disappeared.

Flapping and flailing in his robes of office, Marius waved his hand around in panic, as if De Vries could still be in the room. ‘Wait! I don’t understand.’

The words came back to him. ‘I don’t think she’s got long left.’

The dying woman. What did that mean?

No!

Chapter Thirteen

183

Marius turned to the prone body. He had to – what could he do? Kiss of life, first aid? Anything!

At last, she stopped moving. Marius stared down at her.

An electronic twitter from one of the grey marbles.

Oh god, he thought for the last time. What have I done?

The palace erupted.

I felt it rather than saw it or heard it. A wave of energy loud and total.

Then the orange ball, then the eardrum flattening noise. The Doctor and I leaped up from our bench. A great flat arch of smoke and rubble bursting out from the basalt cylinder. The summit folding in on itself like an exploded block of flats. Blocks of stone sheering out. The whole island shook.

‘I think someone is forcing our hand here,’ said the Doctor. ‘Perhaps time is of the essence after all.’

I kept staring. As the stone cylinder imploded in sheets of rock, concertina fashion, I felt like I was trapped in some mediaeval deranged version of the end of the world. Everything was collapsing.

‘Anji! The boat!’ the Doctor yelled. He was streaking away, fiddling with something in his hand.

Flames illuminated in its black screen, the great boat moored at the jetty began to move. A sliver of gangplank smoothed its way out to the shore.

A second blast from above and the remains of Beta Marina’s primary tourist attraction burst into rubble. Debris began to rain down and, yes, I decided the Doctor was correct.

He was already running on to the boat. Closer up I could see that the blackness was nothing but a hologram, a shimmering illusion. Beneath

it, the outline of a harsher, more antiquated shape sitting brutal and squat. No one could ever accuse Sabbath's vessel of being too beautiful.

I felt the heat on my back and ran. My arm was hurting but the Doctor's ministrations had at least made it moveable again. I trod what I hoped was my last step on the joke that was Selonart soil.

There was a brief fizz as I passed through the screens and then I was on to the tiny deck. Yes, this was Sabbath's boat all right. More like a surfaced submarine now I saw it properly. Metal sheets and rivets. Lovely.

The Doctor was standing at the hatchway. I wondered if he was hesitating.

After all, he had faced the creatures that lived inside before. Did he have a plan for dealing with them?

Chapter Thirteen

184

No, he seemed to be listening. A sound over the last booming reports of the falling column; the final death throes of Beta Marina. I heard it too. Water swishing, no *pouring* furiously somewhere inside the boat. Had it sprung a leak? Never.

'Doctor?' I asked.

He nodded, as if I had commanded him to move. He took a hesitant step forward. With my good arm I steadied myself on the rocking metal. Was I ready for more already? I would have to be. There was no going back now.

I wondered briefly about the natives I had left back on the rocks, staring trancelike at the glaciers around us. Would they be OK? Would they really get what they wanted?

We were inside, stepping down the faceless ladders. The water's rushing was louder here. Definitely below.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Flooding?' he responded, clearly bewildered himself.

Running footsteps, heading this way. There was a brief moment of

panic when I thought about great big hairy beasts streaking up to meet us, claws outstretched, teeth bared, then I realised I recognised those lumbering feet.

There was only one idiot who made sounds like that. I should know, I had been chased alongside them often enough.

The man himself burst on to the scene. He looked awful and was soaked to the skin but at least he was alive. I hardly registered the blonde bit with him.

'You silly sod,' I growled, more relieved than I could have imagined to see him again. 'What have you broken this time?'

Fitz, not for the first time, looked dumbfounded.

Chapter Fourteen

You know folks, you know how it goes. You finally break out of your cell through some miraculous unlikely device entirely not of your own making; you get the chance for once to escape the incessant banging up; you get the chance to actually *do* something again and what happens?

Yeah, you bump into the Doctor and he wants to go straight back on the boat.

There was another reason I argued so heatedly that we get as far away from Sabbath's ship as humanly possible, but to do that requires a little time travel of my own invention. Just a little bit, don't worry.

You have to go back to our white water ride out of the brig. That current, wherever it had come from, was more powerful than even I had thought. As soon as I so much as looked at it I was caught in its grip. It washed me out of the bridge and halfway down to some murky bilge before I managed even to consider whether I had made a wise decision. Luckily, the Fitz noddle reminded me in time that maybe, just maybe I was heading the way that the apes had been flung, and that also maybe it might be an idea to go somewhere else. They weren't likely to be in the best of moods in whatever damp crevice they'd managed to get themselves poured into.

Blindly, I grabbed a metal door frame and felt the current lift me horizon-tal. Valeria clattered into me immediately. With a free hand, yeah I don't know how I did it, I flapped, clasped and hauled her into me. She scrabbled for purchase and there she was, hanging on to my

legs, stretching me out.

Thanks love. The torrent raged over us.

All I could do now was wait for this thing to finish.

And as abruptly as the flood had started up, it was over. The pressure subsided and we floated back down again. The water was at our chest, then our knees and then it was nothing but a few determined trickles on the floor.

I don't know whether this boat had pumps but pretty soon the only evidence there had been an impossible geyser at all was the fact that we were both soaked through.

185

Chapter Fourteen

186

I wasn't quite as exhausted as I had, been, endless days cooped up in the brig saw to it I was still up for the chase. We paused and looked at each other. Valeria was clearly shaken by this miracle, a product no doubt of a lifetime's upbringing on a purely materialistic colony. A diminished, cynical imagination. You wait, I thought. It's only just beginning.

She squeezed water out of her soviet-chic uniform. 'Fitz, what just happened here?'

Thankfully, that cursed alarm had ceased, although the red lights were still flashing. I wondered what had set it off, and whether whatever it was meant more trouble. With our luck so far, trouble was not a distant possibility.

It was as we squelched our way through the unfamiliar, yet distinctly repe-titious maze of boat, that I experienced what you might call a spirits-lowering sense of *déjà vu*. Something lurking, something waiting.

There was another of those urns.

Had I not seen the previous one I would have missed it. As it was, I have a feeling that it was the item's noxious forcefield that drew me to it. Like a bad smell.

‘Fitz?’ Valeria asked irritably. ‘What now?’

We had reached a set of steps, behind which was nothing but long-disused darkness. You could smell the cobwebs and boredom. And the hair-curling electricity of evil.

There it lay, dry and hard, like a fossilised nut. Yep, the same as the one on the Bronstein ship but closed, tight. That was the last thing I wanted to see.

‘Now,’ I muttered, ‘we move just a little bit faster.’

‘So you see, Doctor,’ I was trying to explain as he led us back inside, ‘it’s really not a good idea to be traipsing round this boat. You remember what they’re like. These things. . .’

‘The Warlocks.’

‘These Warlocks. They’re unstoppable. Look, how many ways can I say it?’

I couldn’t transmit the urgency. In the end all I could manage was a pathetic:

‘We’ve got to get off this boat!’ Dry land. Oh how I was dreaming of dry land.

‘Fitz,’ he said gently. ‘I am not denying what you saw. I would guess that somehow these. . . gourds act as batteries for the Warlocks. They must use them for sustenance, take energy from them. . . I don’t know.’

‘But Doc-’

Chapter Fourteen

187

‘The fact of the matter is: the Warlock was destroyed. Sabbath told me himself. Because of you. You and Bloom. It won’t be coming back. Now, I’m not saying this object might not be dangerous. It may well be. But I have more important matters to deal with just at this moment. If you want to dispose of this urn then throw it overboard, burn it, eat it, do whatever. But please, don’t worry. And don’t distract me. By the way, it’s nice to see you again.’

The Doctor halted in his march, us lot behind crowding into him.

Calmly, he licked a finger, held it up, then altered course.

‘Doctor!’ I bellowed.

Anji grabbed my arm. She looked rough. In fact we all looked rough. It had been a rough ride for all of us. ‘Fitz,’ she said. ‘There’s nowhere left to go. This is it.’

‘Ahhh!’ I screeched. My only useful piece of information and he’d simply brushed it aside. Thanks Fitz; old news. ‘Well. . . well, that’s just great!’

I stopped, torn between instinct and, well, what seemed like suicide. The Doctor disappeared through a hatch. Anji followed him, looking back worriedly at me.

Only Valeria stayed. She was starting to regain some of that toughness, that old confidence. ‘Forget them. We should go,’ she said. ‘We should just leave.’

Yes, logic, at last. Hadn’t we just spent half an hour trying to get away?

Hadn’t I had enough first hand experience of what those Warlock creatures could do?

I looked at Valeria. She looked at me. ‘Why not?’ she said. ‘You’re pretty useful. We would be all right. Someone will come, in the end. My own people are in orbit, they will send someone down for me. For us.’

She was right. Absolutely right. I didn’t know what had been happening, it couldn’t have been pleasant what with Anji and the Doctor looking like they did, but it couldn’t be any worse than what was lurking here.

Could I do it? Could I really leave the Doctor?

Of course not. The decision; well, it was no decision at all. ‘You go,’ I said.

I held Valeria’s hands in mine. She really was something special. ‘I don’t want to but I’ve got to stick with my friends. That’s how it has to be. I’m sorry. Go.’

‘OK,’ she said lightly, turned and ran. She pounded her way outside.

What? Hang on. I thought –

Chapter Fourteen

188

Sheesh. Women.

So that was it. Not just for me, but for Fitz too. The Doctor was going to switch the radios and phones back on and call for help.

We were about to have to spend the rest of our days scratching a living here in this lunatic parallel future. All over, just like that.

I had always presumed I'd leave the TARDIS of my own free will. *I had* left the TARDIS of my own free will. Eighteen months ago, to me at least. It had seemed to be either that or get myself killed. But somehow, unbelievably, I came back. Now, I missed my old job, my safe life. How I missed it.

However, I guess I'd always been carrying deep down a little gritty piece of knowledge that told me life just doesn't work like that. Just quit?

The heaviness in my heart betrayed what I had always secretly known: some day I would have to pay for the privilege of running around with the Doctor. I couldn't keep getting away with it. There is a price for everything.

He was busying himself fiddling with the complex controls on the bridge but I hadn't the spirit to join him. I felt old; haggard. Seen too much and done too much. I was too tired to start again.

Fitz would be all right. He didn't know yet but he would survive. He was adaptable; he would flourish in this new life. I was just too tired.

As for the Doctor, his energy was inexhaustible. He would never stop. If he couldn't go running around all over time and space, he would confine himself to running around here. For what?

He suddenly seemed very small. A small man keeping himself busy.

Somehow, he must have picked up on my thoughts. He stopped his rushing and turned to me. He seemed vulnerable, hesitant. 'Anji?' he asked.

'You were pretty hard on Fitz,' I said. 'Considering it doesn't really

matter any more.'

The Doctor tutted. 'Shame on you, Anji. It always matters. Work to be done.'

'Why?' I asked. 'Why do you keep at it? Living this life?'

'Why does anyone do anything?' he replied, typically inscrutable. 'Because I need to. We're not done yet. But I need you. And I need Fitz. Look, we must finish off here, we must see this through. Then we can talk.'

'Keep ourselves busy; take our minds off the situation.'

'Not exactly.' He hooked open a panel from the obscure bridge machinery.

He tugged and the little plastic square came away. 'If you would just hold Chapter Fourteen

189

this for me, please. . . ' I held out a numb hand, as I had done so many times in the past.

Sabbath's bridge. How to describe it? Well, first off, it was nothing like any of the other bridges of any other yachts and boats I'd ever been aboard. Yes, there was a wheel, yes there were windows or screens; there were controls and things. There was a basic similarity with the Victorian vessel it was superficially copying, but the pulsing technology was of an entirely different order altogether. Sabbath had it tucked away in corners like he was afraid of it himself. The whole room was creepy, dark. It pulsed with a low throb.

Like a heartbeat. Alive.

'Do you think you can find the jamming device?' I asked, dropping the panel head on to the deck.

'Not if I stand here talking to you.' He knelt down at the mass of incomprehensible circuitry he had just exposed. His busy fingers started to work, then he paused and looked up at me. Eerie green light illuminated his face.

'Why do I feel we're running out of time again? Why this urgency?'

Something clunked behind me. I presumed it was Fitz, returned from

an understandable sulk. I turned to look. No, it wasn't Fitz.

'Because,' said Sabbath. 'Because because because because because. Because of the wonderful things I does.'

He was as huge as I remembered him. As imposing. Brutal grace. A phrase I had heard somewhere. That was Sabbath: brutal grace.

No weapons, no theatrics. He didn't need them. 'The delightful Anji,' he purred, and it sounded like a threat. 'How lovely to see you again. Doctor, please do get up off the floor. You'll do yourself a mischief.'

The Doctor paused warily, then clambered to his feet. He looked remarkably relaxed for someone who was seeing a ghost. 'The Warlocks,' he stated.

'The Warlocks,' Sabbath confirmed. 'Despite their reputation, not all bad.'

'I wouldn't know about that.'

I felt myself being edged out of the equation. This was a meeting of two mighty wills, the unstoppable force meets the immovable object, the clash of the titans. All that. Little Anji didn't figure.

'What more do you want?' the Doctor asked, apparently weary of confrontation. 'Haven't you done enough?'

'Oh, I'm nearly done,' Sabbath replied. 'I am glad that at last you could join me. The calculations are extremely complex – beyond any possible mortal understanding. Even for me. Now with the Warlock gone, well...'

Chapter Fourteen

190

'I won't help you, you know that.'

Sabbath looked over his bridge. 'If you'd let me finish the last time, you would have realised I was going to let you make up your own mind. I don't need to force you into anything. Please? I do have some tea on board, Chinese, and rather than get silly, why don't we have a chat?'

I moved to the Doctor's side. 'You can't trust him,' I hissed. 'It's a trick.'

The Doctor was staring into Sabbath's eyes. 'No,' he said. 'I don't think it is.'

'My crew seems to have disappeared but I'm sure they're around here somewhere. In the meantime, Anji?'

I quailed under his seemingly gentle gaze. 'What?'

'Put the kettle on, would you my darling?'

Beta Marina was a mess. Smashed beyond redemption. Valeria only realised how much the basalt cylinder had dominated the skyline now it had gone.

The town, already dead, was now appropriately entombed in blocks of its ruddy ancient stones.

Somehow, the light seemed wrong. Too intense, too bright. The sun could be seen only as a prism; a whiteness blurred by some diaphanous bowl arching over the colony. It painted the remains of the island in lurid psychedelic tints.

What had happened here? And how would she get out?

First things first, she thought. Find a weapon. Never go anywhere without a weapon.

She found herself clinging on to old beliefs, old doctrines. The concrete, the material was all there was in the world. All was matter, nothing else.

The rest was just tricks and plots and superstition. She would get a gun and force someone to contact the orbital team.

Picking her way through the ruined harbour proved more difficult than at first glance. The destruction of the palace tower had caused huge seismic upheaval. Nothing was straight any more. Everything built on the basalt had been knocked out of kilter: roads, buildings, people.

Beta Marina was deserted. Could everybody be dead?

No, not everybody. As she climbed, she spotted a rowdy dust-covered group picking themselves out of the ruins of one of the basement bars. Six of them, staggering, slow.

They had weapons. Valeria began to run towards them.

'Hey hey!' said a voice thick with alcohol. 'What have we here?'

In the group, a bespectacled man, a huge crack in one of his mirrored lenses. He was pulling on a filthy bottle of rum, his other hand dangling an automatic rifle. A rifle he was obviously not trained to use.

'What's going on?' asked Valeria. 'What has happened?'

The group, decadent corporate employees all of them, laughed tiredly.

They had been drinking a considerable amount. Men and women, grown fat on capital and other people's labour.

'Our guardian angel!' cried the bespectacled man. 'Come here.'

He lurched towards her and Valeria brought him down with a roundhouse kick. He sprawled in the rubble, the bottle dropping and shattering.

The group were slow to react but they got the message. They backed off.

'You bitch,' slurred the man. Clumsily, he scrabbled for his rifle.

Valeria eyed up the remaining five, then smiled. She stepped round the man, lifted his head and twisted. The sound was reassuringly cracklike. She dropped him and stood back. 'Anyone else?' she asked. 'Or shall we find a way out of here?'

Whalen dreamed of an ocean. Bloom was the ocean, reassuring him, telling him to wait.

Soon the waters would envelop Whalen and the others; a great change.

The oneness where all was entwined and the dark currents raced. Almost theirs, when the pain of their old smallness would be gone.

However, the journey would not be easy; they were not fully prepared.

Bloom would have to help, have to guide. He was already waiting.

The dream was strange because it seemed to Whalen as if he were awake.

Nothing new in that.

Earthers had no word for this state: simultaneous dream and awakeness.

Both in one, full and clear.

And then Whalen was Bloom. Saw how the ocean chose him, picked him out from Earther boat and drew him close. How all times were one time and all place one place. All was water. He saw himself, his aged body sitting on rocks with his fellows. Saw their old lives, the incomplete lives, as little understanding as the imported insects that skimmed the waves of Selonart.

Bloom the man, and more. Wait, Whalen, he calls to the body on the rocks.

Wait and see. I guide you, I help. Trust me.

Chapter Fourteen

192

In the end I thought: I'll show them.

Folks, I apologise for the show of petulance but, you know, I think I had every right.

What I decided was to go and get that urn thing from under the stairs and show it to them. Shove it under their 'distracted' noses until they had to pay me some heed. Realise they should be worried.

You see, there had been something different about this one and I was starting to think that maybe I knew what it was.

Brace yourselves, because you'll find it hard to credit. You may even think me mad, but then again you weren't there. The other urn I had found had been hollowed out, opened up. This one was sealed, like a nut. Or a pod.

Now, I didn't know what was inside but I was damn sure something was.

The other thing is, I can practically hear you now shouting out: 'What

about Bloom? You just left him there!' And you would be right to be shouting that.

Yeah, Bloom. There was a chance he was still down in that brig and all that water was nothing but some burst pipe in the wall. I didn't believe that but I owed it to him to make sure. Maybe he was injured; wounded, still lying on that floor. Anyway, now the Doctor and Anji had arrived, they didn't seem to have any particular urgency about our present predicament so I figured I would go and kill two birds with one stone.

I'd sure feel a lot easier handling that urn with Bloom around. Despite my brave words above, the bad stuff these objects seemed to pump out – of being soiled, knowing – did not fill me with anticipation. Bloom possessed a reassuring quality, similar to the Doctor I realised, but simpler, purer. And a darn sight less rude.

Yes, dear reader, I did make the tea. I was too scared of Sabbath to haul him up on matters of sexism. A single look was all it took for a little kitchen unit to emerge from the gloom of the bridge. The Georgian silver and china cups were as alien to the bridge technology as that technology was to me.

They were sat in comfy leather seats, talking. The Doctor was wary; I could tell by the way he kept looking at me but apart from that they looked like two old gimmers in a gentleman's club. Discussing how they were going to carve up India.

I never liked it when the Doctor schemed, especially not with an old enemy.

Double especially an old enemy he had claimed to have killed.

Chapter Fourteen

193

It goes without saying I was excluded from their conversation. All I could do was listen and keep pouring.

'It can't be done,' the Doctor was saying earnestly. 'Don't you know that by now?'

Sabbath tugged on another huge cigar. Should have picked up on that clue earlier, shouldn't I? Back in the Governor's office; that same stink.

‘Oh Doctor,’ he replied. ‘It’s *been* done. Millennia ago, on this very planet.’

‘That’s different. Completely different! They transformed themselves to become one with infinity. To exist within the new realm. Not to manipulate.

Not to use.’

‘Exactly what I wish to do. What I am doing. Can’t you see how simple it really is?’

‘I see what you want all too clearly,’ the Doctor snapped. Keep a lid on it, I thought. You’re our only chance. Don’t give him a reason. ‘This ridiculous aim to collapse the whole of myriad time into one single linear road.

Nonsense. Utter nonsense.’

‘With the power of Selonart at my disposal, I will achieve a means to perceive all space and all time as one. I will also have the ability to shape and mould these different elements. A chance to rebuild, to re-shape.’

‘Impossible. And immoral. Utterly immoral.’ The Doctor sat back in his chair, smarting with affronted dignity. ‘And look at the mess you’ve made of it so far.’

Sabbath raised a warning finger. ‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘Moral. Essentially your very own morals. However, instead of randomly picking my way through the universe sticking plasters over wounds here and there, I can instantly heal the whole body. Holistic medicine you might call it. A single universe free and uncluttered. This must happen, Doctor. And with you to help me we can. . .’

‘Did you really expect me to believe you? To go along with this?’

‘Why not?’ Sabbath asked. ‘Think about it. And you, Anji.’ I started at the mention of my name. ‘You interfere with existence, shape the universe to fit your own moral viewpoint. You do what you can.’ He stretched out his hands. ‘Sometimes, well, it seems like nothing but pinpricks. You cannot be everywhere at once. You feel you have a duty to fight evil wherever you find it, do you not? Well, I am offering you the opportunity to triumph forever.

If you choose to reject me, well, you must reject your own motives, for

what you love is the struggle and the drama. Not the resolution. You do good Chapter Fourteen

194

because it flatters your ego.'

He looked at the Doctor squarely, sincerely. 'I am giving you the chance to save existence. To become the embodiment of Good.'

I too looked at the Doctor. There had to be a flaw in the argument. This had to be flannell. It was, wasn't it?

'What about the Warlocks?' the Doctor asked. 'What kind of Good necessi-tates releasing that into the cosmos?'

'I had to. You weren't going to help me, were you? I left you the model boat to get you on my trail but I couldn't predict exactly how and when you would get to me. Selonart is a present, Doctor, but it isn't for everyone. The calculations, the timing, type and amounts of energy required to stir it up are stupidly complicated. Creating the primal matter out of the oceans involves a lot more than blowing up engines. The Warlocks collect and store life-energy from their victims. Dispense it accurately. I used them in the way I had to use the Earth regatta, and I had to use it this year. Complex calculations from ancient lore don't solve themselves, you know. They had the power to activate Selonart and the arcane knowledge to survive breaching infinity. A small price to pay.'

'And what price did they ask in return?'

'Does it matter? Once I enter infinity I will alter the universe and remove their stain.'

He flicked ash out into his saucer with indifferent strength.

And now it was the Doctor's turn to laugh. A real good head-back belter.

'Oh Sabbath, you're a marvel. You really are. So egotistical, so full of yourself. The cosmos isn't an engine you can fine tune. Its complications are so . . .

so intricate, so complex, so lush, no single entity can ever control it.'

'I tell you I can!'

'No! And this is why. You didn't know Major Kallison, did you? You must have seen her, up in the Governor's palace.'

'There was a woman, dead on the floor. . . ' Sabbath gave the Doctor a suspicious look.

'She knew you,' the Doctor said. 'Oh yes. She had a mission. From Earth.'

A secret society dating back to. . . well, whenever you left them in the lurch.

Centuries old. And do you know what that mission was, Sabbath?'

'Of course I don't.'

'Exactly,' snapped the Doctor. 'But you should. Her mission, the society's mission, was to kill you.'

Chapter Fourteen

195

'Nonsense. I would have known.'

'Yes, you should. But you didn't. Why? Because in your own time-line *they never formed*. They evolved in a different strand of the multiverse. The one in which we now exist!'

Sabbath's rolled face flushed pink. I saw it, plain as day. He controlled it but the Doctor had got to him. Touché! I resisted thumping the tea tray.

'That's not true,' Sabbath said simply. And what an effort it must have taken. 'You're lying.'

'You know I am telling the truth. The alterations in the timeline, alterations begun by you have already resolved themselves in ways you couldn't possibly comprehend. Ways beyond the powers of even this planet. Didn't you learn anything in Siberia? The universe isn't a stone statue; it's a living creature.'

However much you alter and manipulate, it will adapt. Reality will evolve to confound you. This plan simply is not going to work. Turn the jamming device off and let the people evacuate!'

The Doctor rose from his seat and stared. His jaw was flickering with

tension, his fists bunched.

'IT WILL WORK!' Sabbath roared. He flung the tea service aside. I thought he was going to punch the Doctor. Instead, he nodded at something on the bridge console. Engines smoothly growled into life.

'You also overlooked the natives here, Sabbath. Overlooked how Selonart is preparing them for the infinity process. It takes generations. Generations.'

All the Warlock spells in the world won't protect you from its effects. Nothing can.'

Sabbath was ignoring him, like a small boy refusing to go to bed. Instead he began toying with the bridge controls, operating systems. 'The natives are nothing,' he muttered. 'Human colonists. Merely human.'

'For heaven's sake,' the Doctor insisted. 'You had Bloom in your brig for two days. He can operate within infinity; faculties have been engineered in his physiology. New sensory organs that allow perception. Didn't you work it out? Or were you too busy polishing your trophies? You've made too many mistakes, Sabbath, too many errors. The Warlocks and now this. Stop it before you make everything worse.'

Sabbath barked a command and the black holographic shields covering the bridge windows disappeared. No need for disguise any more, I guessed.

'Diving stations,' he snapped and the ship's computer piped a response. He turned back to us, a fire blazing in his eyes. 'You are a hypocrite, Doctor. A Chapter Fourteen

196

moral coward. I will win without you. Don't try to stop me. I will brook no further dissent.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I must. I have to.'

'Then you will stay there. Restrain!'

I decided the time was right to leave. I made a move to bolt for the door.

However, before I could even get started, something black and mechanical came snaking down from the ceiling at me. Tubes, like plastic tentacles, swooping at us at terrifying speed. They whipped at my face and slid round my body. I screamed. The Doctor too was flailing with the stabbing straps with about as much success as I was having. Almost immediately we were helpless. Once caught, the tubes lifted us from the floor, leaving us dangling.

I didn't like to think about allusions to flies caught in webs.

'Sabbath!' spat the Doctor.

The big man himself ignored us. His hands flashed across the bridge console. There came a great roar from the engines and then we were moving away from the harbour.

At last, Sabbath turned. He was calm again. Supremely calm.

'Enough, Doctor. In a few moments you will know how foolish you were.'

He shook his head. 'So be it. We will enter infinity together.'

I was busy prising the urn into a vacuum carrier when the ship lurched. Off again. How wonderful. What was the Doctor playing at?

I'd looked in the brig. Empty. Bloom had simply gone. Not even water left. I couldn't even begin to guess what had happened to him so I didn't try.

Beyond me. As with Valeria, I missed him. He already seemed like an old friend.

Still full of the old frustration and resentment, I picked my way across the deck until I found this handy carrier then went straight to the urn.

As I reached the steps behind which it lay, I had the distinct feeling I was being watched. The apes? Hadn't heard a howl out of them and anyway subtle sneaking wasn't their style. I took a step forward and stopped again.

It was the urn. Like a single eye, it seemed to be observing me in the darkness.

Back off, Fitz, I thought. Why on earth are you doing this?

Because I had a point to prove, that was why. I'll show you, Doctor. I

gritted my teeth and went in.

Chapter Fourteen

197

With a metal bar as a tool, I rolled that unblinking orb towards the upturned carrier. Very graceful, very dignified.

Stop looking at me!

Waves of cold air wafted out from that little enclave. My hands and face felt frozen. I could feel it scrutinising me, goading me on. 'Shut up!' I yelled.

There was something here, some presence. I swung round, bar raised to strike. Nothing. Just the quiet grind of the engines. I was out of breath, I didn't know why. And tired. Tired too.

At last, I got the thing rolling into the container. I suddenly wondered how I had I found it so easily. It was so well hidden, so protected in this disused little black corner. What possessed me to go and look?

The Doctor would know. Best to leave the thing here, in case it was dangerous or something. Get the Doctor to take a look at it. Leave it for later.

I placed a shaking hand on the metal rail of the ladder. I willed myself to walk up. I could see myself climbing, comprehend how easy it would be, but somehow I just couldn't perform the physical action. Why was it so cold? I felt the beginnings of a headache; my skull was too tight.

Fitz, just move! I tried to imagine Anji nagging me. If that didn't get me going nothing would.

The headache spread. I just could not move. This was absurd. Tense pain shot up my arm. Something would have to break soon if I kept this grip on the ladder. Me.

And then it came to me. The urn. Take it up there like you planned. That'll ease the tension. Do what you came here to do. My teeth began to grind in my mouth. Yes, I couldn't stay here locked like an idiot. I felt my whole body was about to shatter.

Do that. Take the urn up. Take it.

Valeria led her little hungover band back down to the harbour again. It would be in everybody's interest, she had decided, if she took command of the situation. Take control of the black boat and break through this ring of ice that besieged the Marina. Get some order re-established.

Once she had broken the man's neck, the rest of them were only too pleased to fall into line. She had ordered them to get some fresh water in them and sober up.

Essentially, they were like all people, they just needed a strong lead. A set of rules for behaviour for the benefit of the common good under the threat Chapter Fourteen

198

of supreme punishment for deviation. The reason the Bronstein Colonies would eventually rule the empire. When the economic conditions became inevitable.

In the meantime, getting off-planet would be sufficient.

Valeria was beginning to regret her earlier decision to quit the boat. She had allowed her fear to overwhelm her. Fitz was a fool but his childish infatuation had been amusing. She had found herself liking him; another reason to leave. She couldn't start allowing emotion to come and interfere.

Her training had been too thorough for that.

Of course, that vessel was the only method of escaping the island. Now it was time to atone for that mistake. She would command the black ship, by force if necessary.

Only by the time they reached the jetty, the black ship was now an archaic-looking grey ship and not only was it drifting away from Beta Marina across the water, it was also sinking into that water.

As she watched, understanding she had missed her last chance, the boat disappeared completely. Only a few half-hearted bubbles betrayed the fact that it had ever existed at all.

'Great,' said one of her new soldiers. 'What do we do now?'

Chapter Fifteen

The Hallowe'en glow of the timeberg permeated the anaemic Selonart waters.

The swelling, organic angles and curves of the unfolding glaciers seemed cheapened by its own light. As Sabbath's cameras tracked around, the Doctor noticed that the ghoulish, shadowy matter had stretched a membranous canopy out underneath the waters of the harbour, a twin to the dome thickening over its head. The *Jonah*, with its Warlock-derived defences, was now a bubble, a pocket of linear time trapped in stone.

Sabbath busied himself around the bridge, preparing himself for however he planned to survive the infinity process. He produced an odd, fetid-looking, simple stone jar.

As the Doctor and Anji watched, he twisted the stopper and popped the jar open. Immediately the bridge was filled with a strong odour, like incense mingled with burnt fat. Bracing himself, Sabbath closed his eyes and dipped his head into the jar. He inhaled noisily and, the Doctor thought, reluctantly.

'Clears your nose and soothes your throat?' he asked, once Sabbath's coughing fit had subsided. 'A present from the Warlocks?'

The colour returned to Sabbath's face. Blinking away tears, he replied,

'In a way, Doctor. More a present from the crews of the Mikron and the Bronstein. A souvenir of the Selonart regatta. Stout fellows; they put their heart and souls into this jar.'

The Doctor wriggled in his tubular chains. 'Let me out of these. If you're foolish enough to think that hocus pocus is going to protect you you'll need my help.'

Sabbath looked at the floor, head bowed. 'Oh no, Doctor. You had your chance. You don't get another.' He raised his powerful skull. It was as if he had already entered some kind of trance. Veins bulged on his forehead and blood pumped his face red. Eyes folded up to the top of their sockets. He bared his teeth in the parody of a smile and raised his arms, Christlike. 'As was foretold, justice will unfold.' He circled round, every muscle in his body taut with tension. 'I will end history.'

One glance and the engines roared.

The *Jonah* darted forward and through the viewing screens the unbroken wall of ice loomed close until it filled all vision. A thump and the Doctor and Anji were knocked swinging as the vessel drilled into the dull, glowing mass.

A strange calm fell over the ship. All aboard felt the pull – a new connection in their minds, as if an electric current had been inducted straight into their brains. A force so powerful and all-encompassing that will, perception and one's own identity were sifted apart, picked apart. It was as if they were unbinding, returning to constituent components.

Needless to say, reliable reports of what happened next were somewhat hard to come by. Only one on the planet could really know what happened when the *Jonah* entered the timeberg, when the Infinity Race was finally won, and that person was not even a member of the crew.

For those on board, the last true shared memory they could all attest to as fact was that just as the ship completed its own burial, Fitz arrived on the bridge and released the second Warlock from its impossibly small lair, where it had lain dormant throughout all Sabbath's time on Selonart.

It seemed to me I was dreaming. I was still Anji, still trussed up in this ridiculous web of tubes. Still me, but somehow more than me.

I'll try to explain as best I can.

We hit the mountain like a bullet. Aimed, fired and thwacked. Chunks of the ice stuff tumbled over the windows. The experience was strangely organic. I felt like we had breached a body and were now sailing around inside it.

To recall it accurately, I would need help. As none is available you will have to take my word for the frenzied events that took place.

My head started to do something very funny. I started seeing double, and triple, and then all over the place. It wasn't confusion, quite the opposite. It was clarity. Total clarity. I felt. . . I don't know, like maybe a film director feels if he's got ten cameras filming one shot from different angles. Yes, that was what I was seeing: different

angles.

I struggled to keep my senses clear. I saw Fitz enter, holding an object that looked like a pineapple. There was something wrong with him. He looked as pale as death; his previous bruises stood out like tattoos. His mouth was Chapter Fifteen

201

moving but whether he actually spoke, I could not be sure. He dropped the object to the floor.

Whatever it was sure put the fear of god into Sabbath. The theatrics of a few moments ago ceased as the little dried ball thing rolled towards him. He dropped his arms and backed away.

Now, you have to remember that the time stuff we had entered was mess-ing with my brain, so I can't say if what I saw next was real or not.

The little nut/pinecone/pod thing *unravelled*.

A dark shadow seemed to squeeze itself like toothpaste from a tube. Only this had nothing to do with hygiene. It was more like rotten, brown pus. And it spread, spread itself across the deck floor.

I heard Sabbath moaning, 'No, no. . .' and there was real fear in his voice. I think the fact that someone like him could be afraid cleared my head. I really believe that fact unclogged the force that was busy unpicking my being. If Sabbath was afraid, what was this thing?

Slowly the shadow gained substance. It grew from the floor and I smelled a charnel smell, a sweet smell, like something that had been dead too long.

The same smell I had first had forced up my nostrils back on the MikronCorps yacht, what seemed like an eternity ago.

The shadow fleshed itself out further. Shadow became shape became limbs and head. It was like seeing some evil little foetus growing up in an instant. Sticky liquid gleamed in the pallid light of its thin flesh. Black eyes flashed; the filthy remnants of clothing clung to impossibly elongated and thin anatomy.

The Warlock raised itself up and grinned its humourless, fixed smile. It seemed to fill the bridge, overwhelming even the effects of the

timeberg.

Sabbath was transfixed. The Doctor and I weren't too mobile either, although we did our best to wriggle away.

'I kept my bargain!' Sabbath yelled at it. His voice cracked with emotion.

'You will keep yours!'

The Warlock pointed. A strange sound, like a child's giggle, erupted from its lipless mouth. 'Bargain. . . ?' it hissed, almost amused.

'Yes, a bargain! We had an agreement. I released you; broke the seals of exile!'

The creature just seemed to keep growing. 'No. . . bargain. . . '

'I broke the seals! Without me you'd still be rotting on that tomb planet of yours. I released you.' Sabbath took a step forward, as if uttering this had Chapter Fifteen

202

given him strength.

'Ssealss,' said the Warlock, revealing no emotion. 'No. . . ssealss. Just. .

.

bait. You were to open the way. . . for us.'

Sabbath's mouth clapped shut. Stymied, I guessed. What an idiot. Even I could see that if you messed with this lot they weren't going to play by the rules.

The Warlock slithered on its clacking feet to the helm. A rotten tongue flickered over its teeth. 'Infinity to be. . . ours. . . ' Its smugness was nauseating.

Sabbath looked around for something. At us. 'Take these three,' he said at last. 'Have them. Let me share with you. You'll need my help to navigate through the transformation. I have information you don't know.'

The Warlock didn't even look at him. 'Protection. . . ' it said softly, 'is re-scinded. . . '

Sabbath grabbed the frozen Fitz and pushed him forward. ‘This is the one that trapped your brother. Look, I give this information freely.’ Fitz offered no resistance. It was horrible to see him shuffle, like a piece of meat.

‘Oh god. Fitz!’ I remember yelling. ‘Wake up!’

At last, Sabbath had piqued the Warlock’s interest. Its huge hulking shape, impenetrable shadow like a sweeping cloak around it, turned on Fitz.

‘Fitz! Move, get out of there!’ I turned to the Doctor, willing him to act. He wasn’t even looking; had his eyes closed as if hoping the Warlock was just going to go away.

‘Sabbath, please. Don’t do this.’ I didn’t mind begging. But he too was gone; his mind twisting as he resisted the effects of the timeberg long enough to find some bargaining point, some way of negotiating his way out of this.

The creature squealed with delight. Claws snicked up out of the gloom.

‘I give this man to you,’ said Sabbath blearily ‘But you must let me live.

This is my ship and your kind are still vulnerable to these infinity effects.

Honour your bargain or I will destroy you.’

The creature seemed fixated with Fitz. Its bony fingernails wriggled with obscene excitement. ‘Death. . .’ it said. ‘Has been long. . . time. . .’

Quick and light, like a surgeon, it drew a line across Fitz’s throat, slitting it. It watched as the compliant body waited, then fell.

‘Fitz!’ I screamed. ‘Fitz!’

Sabbath was shaking with rage and anticipation. ‘Well?’ he roared.

Chapter Fifteen

203

The Warlock stared at Fitz’s prone body. It was as if it was waiting for

every trace of life to be extinguished.

'I order you to make the bargain!'

He jumped forward. Like lightning, the creature sprang at him. Its claws sank into Sabbath's head. 'You. . . dare. . .' it said. 'Your death will be. . .

sslow. . . '

Sabbath screamed like a woman.

I heard a moan from next to me. At last, the Doctor had opened his eyes.

He stared at the nightmare scene. 'Sabbath!' he yelled.

Something in the tone grabbed Sabbath's attention. Panicked eyes turned to the Doctor. For a second he failed to comprehend, then the man, this big fool who'd let the Warlocks loose and now knew it was all over, yelled.

'Release!'

The tubes around us snapped away, slithering back into the roof. The Warlock hesitated, turned to us, dropped Sabbath and prepared to attack.

My useless limbs cramped and I hit the deck; all over Fitz. There had to be something I could do.

The stench of the Warlock was terrific. Its shadow rose and rose until it seemed to fill the cabin. All I could see was its mad, twitching face and its hungry, hungry eyes.

Only the Doctor moved. He dived to the bridge controls and thumped a fist down on to them. As the Warlock screeched, the windows slid open and the ocean, as well as the timeberg of course, blasted all over us.

Currents merge and fly. Bloom like the bullet he always dreamed. Sees Ma again, pictures flash by in the speed. Bloom a muscle, flexing. He lives. At last, he lives.

Bloom gathers in Whalen and his friends. They still afraid, still enough Earther not to be sure. Bloom helps them make the move; the drop, the dive from land to water. Only pure Earthers, who scream when

they gathered, fail to become. Bloom is sad, he cannot help those not-ready.

His friends become with him and soon at peace. All is mingled, all becomes clear.

Now Bloom work is done just movement and sensing and all. Soon, ocean ready to join with big everything-ocean for all ways.

But one thing. Friends remain. A shout, in the ocean. A shout Bloom hear around Selonart. Fitz is dead. The shout reverberates around the world Chapter Fifteen

204

through the pulsing sea that is now Bloom. Sadness. Loss. Fitz dead.

Who shouts. Who.

Bloom thinks and feels Doctor like grain of sand in the water. Struggling still with not-become. Losing himself, dissipating, still afraid, needing, needing. Needing Bloom.

Bloom gathers Doctor, turning him in ocean. Others, bad dark stain included follow. Anji. Doctor losing.

'Help me, Bloom,' he says – incredible, inexplicable will, holding on to old life – 'Help me see... help me shape...'

Nothing but goodness in Doctor. Different, more complicated, not like Bloom. But goodness. 'I push now,' he tells the Doctor in the vast, soothing voice of the sea. Doctor struggles fading; he is becoming with-Bloom. 'Help me push... help me see...'

Bloom helps.

'Oh god. Fitz!' I remember yelling. 'Wake up!'

At last, Sabbath had piqued the Warlock's interest. Its huge hulking shape, impenetrable shadow like a sweeping cloak around it, turned on Fitz.

'Fitz! Move, get out of there!' I turned to the Doctor, willing him to act. He wasn't even looking; had his eyes closed as if hoping the Warlock was just going to go away.

'Sabbath, please. Don't do this.' But he too was gone; his mind

twisting as he resisted the effects of the timeberg long enough to find some bargaining point, some way of negotiating his way out of this.

The creature squealed with delight. Claws snicked up out of the gloom.

'I give this man to you,' said Sabbath blearily 'But you must let me live.'

This is my ship and your kind are still vulnerable to these infinity effects.

Honour your bargain or I will destroy you.'

The creature seemed fixated with Fitz. Its bony fingernails wriggled with obscene excitement. 'Death. . .' it said. 'Has been long. . . time. . .'

'Warlock!' yelled the Doctor. 'Listen to me!'

So he *was* awake. Awake and insane. I just kept staring at that bony finger, sharp and honed as a scalpel, poised across Fitz's throat.

'Listen!' came the Doctor's voice again, only this time it boomed, as large and loud as a roaring torrent.

The heaving bridge became still. Sabbath gaped open-mouthed at the Doctor. As did I. Only Fitz remained blank, staring ahead like someone had Chapter Fifteen

205

pulled his brain out.

Even the Warlock was frozen mid-slice. That glistening head twisted as it stared at the source of that inhuman, deific voice.

Suddenly, the web that had ensnared me for so long fell away, back to lifeless plastic.

Similar ropes peeled from the Doctor's form. He was glowing, awesome.

His hair bristled with static as some power, some planetary-sized power, flowed through him. What on earth?

The Warlock shrieked and launched itself at the Doctor. I ducked.

I saw a flurry of stick-limbs and flailing claws. The bridge was filled with unearthly screeching. Only the Doctor remained calm.

He raised a finger and the Warlock stopped, immobile. It howled in its agony.

'Return,' said the Doctor softly, and the shadow began to reduce. The Warlock bit and scrabbled and fought all the way, but slowly it shrank back into its black shadow. Its eyes spat hatred at the Doctor as it went.

Down, down it shrank, spitting and mewling, reverting to the quivering cancerous stain that had originally poured from the pod. The urn itself sucked back the paste and re-sealed itself. A final howl of rage rang round the suddenly still bridge. The pod wobbled gently on the deck and then was still.

'D-Doctor?' I asked, and he smiled. Gentle again, like the old Doctor. Mind you, he was still glowing, and his body rippled in odd watery flickers, so I wasn't entirely convinced. He snapped his fingers and Fitz abruptly jerked into life. 'Welcome back.'

Fitz looked around, alert, ready to run. 'Where am I? Who do I hit?'

'No one,' said the Doctor. 'It's all over.'

I was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when suddenly Sabbath made his move. He leaped for the bridge controls. I don't know what he planned to do but he didn't make it. A single glance from the Doctor and those tubular restraints came bundling out of the ceiling for him. Within seconds it was his turn to play the Christmas turkey. The tubes even wrapped themselves around his cruel mouth so we didn't have to listen to his seemingly endless snarling profanities.

Instead, it was the Doctor who began to manipulate the boat. Illuminated hands swept over the complex control panel. Out through the screens the Chapter Fifteen

timeberg was melting away, revealing good old clear blue water again. The *Jonah* began to turn.

'Is... is it really over, Doctor?' I asked.

He nodded. The glow seemed to intensify. 'Yes, thanks to an old

friend.

Bloom.'

Bloom?

'You see,' the Doctor continued, 'he is the real winner of the Infinity Race.

The only being in the universe capable of fully comprehending and controlling the forces that Selonart has unleashed.'

Of course, it all made sense. Well, maybe not all. But it made some kind of sense.

'What?' asked a dazed and confused Fitz.

The Doctor raised his eyebrows and the ship began to surface. 'With Bloom as my guide, I have managed to gain some control over infinity. Some choice over the variety of paths one can take. He facilitated the transcendence of his own people. I called out to him and he responded. Nothing but kindness.'

We surfaced. There in front of us lay the ruins of Beta Marina. Ruined but perhaps not forever. The sun was shining again and it was another beautiful day. As I watched, I saw people at the jetty staring at us. Water streamed off the hull.

'What now, Doctor?' I asked. To be perfectly honest, I could have just made do with a bath, food and a long holiday somewhere very very dry.

He nodded. 'Repair the damage to the Marina. I can undo all that Sabbath and the Warlocks have damaged. I can even take Selonart back to the start of the race and run it properly. Then, I suppose I –'

He paused. A troubled frown crossed his face. He was breathing deeply.

'Doctor?' asked Fitz, echoing my own concern.

He placed glowing hands on our shoulders and looked at us. I thought he seemed very old and very sad. 'No,' he said. 'No. This isn't right. I can't. Not like this.'

He looked down at himself, still bathed in golden light. 'Not like this.'

‘Oh god. Fitz!’ I remember yelling. ‘Wake up!’

At last, Sabbath had piqued the Warlock’s interest. Its huge hulking shape, impenetrable shadow like a sweeping cloak around it, turned on Fitz.

‘Fitz! Move, get out of there!’ I turned to the Doctor, willing him to act. He wasn’t even looking; had his eyes closed as if hoping the Warlock was just Chapter Fifteen

207

going to go away.

‘Sabbath, please. Don’t do this.’ But he too was gone; his mind twisting as he resisted the effects of the timeberg long enough to find some bargaining point, some way of negotiating his way out of this.

The creature squealed with delight. Claws snicked up out of the gloom.

‘I give this man to you,’ said Sabbath blearily. ‘But you must let me live.

This is my ship and your kind are still vulnerable to these infinity effects.

Honour your bargain or I will destroy you.’

The creature seemed fixated with Fitz. Its bony fingernails wriggled with obscene excitement. ‘Death. . .’ it said. ‘Has been long. . . time. . .’

‘Fitz!’ bellowed the Doctor.

As the Warlock nicked Fitz’s throat, something powerful blurred in the poor guy’s eyes. Something. . . huge.

Instinctively, he snapped up a hand and grabbed that sickening talon. He wrenched and the Warlock’s wrist snapped with a dry dusty click. The creature screamed and Fitz threw it across the bridge, where it smashed into a wall of pulsating technology. It seemed to stick in the metal and plastic which gave way under its necrotic body. There was a spark and a flash and the whole side erupted into a sparking, flaming roar. The heat washed over me, a breath of boiling air.

‘Sabbath!’ bellowed the Doctor again.

The powerful man blinked, not quite understanding, still shocked from Fitz's blow.

'Get us out of here, you idiot!' I yelled, clarifying the issue.

The Warlock danced under the voltage of the snaking cables around it. It squirmed and twisted angrily, like a trapped wasp.

Finally, Sabbath came round. 'Release!' he shouted, and instantly those tubular cables were gone and flicking back into the ceiling.

Fitz, fully aware now, but blinking like he'd just woken up, stopped me falling as my limbs cramped up. 'I've got you, I've got you,' he kept repeating.

'Fine,' I replied. 'Just don't let go.' I held him as tight as my limp arms would allow.

Frighteningly quickly, the Warlock was emerging from the sparking console. It glared at us, stretching its lipless mouth with rage. Its useless claw dangled from its wrist.

The Doctor was at the helm, hands dancing over the controls.

'What are you doing?' Sabbath snapped and leaped at him. 'No!'

Chapter Fifteen

208

Fitz was great, reacted brilliantly, saved us all once again. Shame it was me he threw at the great charging figure. I cannoned into Sabbath, hearing my own words dancing around in my head: 'I told you not to let go!' We went down together and then Fitz jumped on top of us. Sabbath was heaving, trying to flip us off, steaming and pushing like a bull. I felt like a wafer-thin slice inside two thick doorstops of bread. Together they squeezed the breath out of me.

I caught a glimpse of the Doctor taking one last look at our undignified mass. The Warlock was almost free and shrilling in triumph.

'Anji. Fitz. When I say run, run.' He winked and thumped a fist down on the console.

The bridge windows slid open and the ocean poured in on us.

Water hit me like a lorry. Fitz rolled off and I got a fountain full in the face.

It snapped my head back. Someone grasped my hand and when I could at least blurrily open my eyes, I saw it was the Doctor. Somehow, he dragged me clear of Sabbath. I scrabbled to get a footing on the shifting deck and finally managed to snatch at a console edge. The freezing water surrounded us, and lifted us towards the metal ceiling.

'Out! Out through the gap!' shouted the Doctor. I didn't need telling twice.

I half-swam, half-walked, half-pulled myself along (OK, that's three halves).

Get lost) until I got myself next to the gaping, pouring frame. Beside me, Fitz was doing exactly the same.

'Doctor!' came a terrible scream from behind.

Sabbath.

Pulling my head clear from the stream, I turned. The bridge was neck-high in water already, the clear dissipated water of Selonart. Which meant I could see more than I wanted to.

The Warlock had a grip with its good hand around Sabbath's ankle and was systematically reeling him in. His bald head kept popping up over the waves and his mouth gasped for air. You can yell mate, I thought, but there's no way I'm going back for you.

As well as hauling Sabbath, the Warlock was shrinking. Reverting back to creepy shadow. It was a still point in all that raging water and its black eyes were fixed and unblinking. Sabbath was pulled under.

Through the rising liquid, I saw that he too seemed to be shrinking. The Warlock was drawing itself and him in, reducing them both. The urn thing popped to the surface and, unbelievably, churning up a huge whirlpool as Chapter Fifteen

it did so, it sucked in the Warlock's shrinking mass. All I could think of was a black hole, the crushing gravitational pull. Then only a clacking claw remained, crushing Sabbath in with it. He was spinning

round in the current, screaming.

The Doctor appeared in my vision and I could tell he was going to make a move to help. Simultaneously, Fitz and I grabbed him. ‘No way, Doctor,’ said Fitz.

‘You ain’t going anywhere,’ I added, trying to sound threatening.

‘Doctor!’ Sabbath gave a final yelp and then he was gone. Sucked away like a piece of fluff up a vacuum cleaner. The urn sat there threateningly for a second, and I could swear it was staring evilly at me, then it too just imploded in on itself.

‘I could have saved him,’ said the Doctor.

‘Just swim,’ I replied. ‘Just go.’

And with that, as the water reached the ceiling and the pressure finally equalised, I launched myself out of that stricken boat into clear blue sea. I had never felt so glad to be alive.

Well folks, Fitz here, in at the death. All in all I have to say it was a pretty confusing time. When my head popped up out of the sea and I saw Beta Marina sitting there in front of us, minus its defining cylinder, I felt as if I had woken up from a jagged, very strange dream.

I don’t know why, but as the morning sun beat down on us, and I looked round at the battered and bruised bobbing faces of the Doctor and Anji, I found it all very very funny. I started to laugh. Not a little bit, not even a lot.

Massive. I roared.

I laughed so much I started to worry I might drown. Which just set the other two off.

We laughed and splashed and floundered until it got serious. We only just found the energy to swim to the harbour.

Bloom stood silently waiting for us.

Bloom!

In my dream, I could have sworn he was talking to me. More, that he’d got inside me and was swimming around. He had been reassuring me, in that gentle way of his, telling me everything was going to turn out for the best.

I don't know what he had done but I knew with every fibre of my being that he had saved me. Saved all of us. Thanks to the Doctor.

Chapter Fifteen

210

I staggered up the stone steps and on to that too-familiar harbour walkway.

Bloom smiled. Cascades of water streamed out of my ragged clothes. I thought of the ships we'd been on, the cells we'd sat in.

'Fitz,' he said softly.

He seemed less clumsy now; in fact, the opposite. He was so graceful he seemed hardly to be standing at all. I had the distinct feeling he could have just floated right away if he had felt like it.

I held out a damp hand. He clasped it in his big fist. 'I told you not to worry about me,' he said.

'Thanks,' I replied, though what for I couldn't really remember. I just knew I owed him. 'I'd hug you but I'd get you soaked.'

'No you wouldn't,' he said. So I hugged him anyway.

The Doctor and Anji, equally as weary and drenched and content as I was, lumbered themselves up to us.

'Mr Bloom,' said the Doctor. 'How do you feel?'

'Oh, just fine. Never better. And, yes, I think you will too when you see what I see.'

He pointed.

Out to sea, a sea mercifully free of luminous icebergs, I saw a little blue object bobbing in the waves. A little blue box.

'Oh god,' said Anji, predictably. 'You mean there's more swimming?' However, she was smiling and looking very, very relieved.

Bloom laughed. 'I think there's a good chance the tide might bring it in.'

'What about Whalen and the others?' she asked, serious again.

‘They are here. Taking a little time to adjust but . . . complete.’

I looked around at the ruined Marina. It was completely deserted. ‘And Valeria, and all the other people here?’

‘The Earthers? They are with us, also. Frightened and angry. Not yet ready to understand and appreciate, not for a long time, but they will accept and find peace when they are ready.’

‘Well, watch out for that Valeria,’ I said. ‘She may take a bit of taming.’

I thought about her, out there wherever it was Bloom really lived. Find peace? Her? It would take a long time. I hoped she did though, even if that just meant she didn’t want to come after me any more.

Bloom looked up, as if sniffing something. ‘Now, I must go. The Earthers need much from me now. As always. And I sense you feel you have more to do.’

Chapter Fifteen

211

The Doctor coughed, as if embarrassed. ‘Well, Bloom. I understand how much you’ve achieved here.’

‘Really Doctor, it was nothing.’

‘I will not presume to argue with you. It still seems a big gesture to me.

This must not, of course, happen again. Selonart, I mean.’

Bloom grinned and looked down at the water. ‘Oh Selonart will always be here, Doctor. Waiting. There is nothing even I can do about that.’

Bloom started to move away, then stopped himself. ‘Tell me, Doctor,’ he said, curious. ‘I understand many things now, but I do not understand why you chose not to walk with us. To remain in such a limited realm. Were you afraid? Many are until they. . . take the plunge. But you do not seem like a man to be afraid.’

The Doctor rubbed his chin. What was this, I wondered.

‘I was afraid, yes, Bloom,’ he replied eventually. ‘However, I was also.

..

well, I wasn't ready and I do like to think there is always a choice. This may be a limited realm; a small realm. . . but that smallness happens to suit me.

Perhaps Sabbath was right, I am in it for the adventure. Perhaps for me, the adventure itself is the thing.'

Bloom nodded. 'Then I really do not know everything. Yet. Enjoy your adventure, Doctor. And Anji. And Fitz. I would give you some famous last words but I have learned there is no such thing as last anything. So, I will just say goodbye.'

'Goodbye Bloom,' said Anji and kissed him on the cheek.

One last smile and Bloom turned and dived off the jetty. He hit the water with a splash and then he was gone.

We watched for a while; just watched the sea. The TARDIS nudged its way towards us until it finally nestled up against the stone wall of the harbour.

Finally, Anji turned to the Doctor. Aware of her gaze, he picked up some pebbles and began tossing them idly in. What was up with her?

'OK then, Doctor,' she said, in a storm front approaching type voice. 'What did he mean, "I sense you have more to do?" It's over. Thank god. It's all over.'

'You can stay here,' he said cryptically. 'I promise I will come back for you.'

'Hey, no way!' I snapped. 'Whatever it is, wherever you go, you don't get rid of me that easily.'

The Doctor hurled a pebble. It skimmed five times before sinking.
Pretty Chapter Fifteen

212

good try. 'Very well. But you will stay in the TARDIS and you will not interfere. Not a request.'

He stared us both down.

I looked around, looked at the sea, the ocean, the few boats left.

Selonart.

Home of the Fourteenth Trans-Global Regatta. The last Trans-Global Regatta.

Nice place but a bit too quiet for my tastes.

‘Come on Fitz,’ said Anji. ‘Help us fish this thing out.’

I heard a buzz in the sky, looked up and saw the first of the rescue shuttles dropping down out of orbit.

Good luck, I thought, as I walked to the water’s edge.

I followed Fitz and the Doctor into the TARDIS. That little blooming boat still sat on the central column. Everything else had been tipped all over the place, presumably thanks to the nuclear blast, but that thing still just sat there like the junk mail parasite it was.

I did the honours. Appropriately enough I hurled it into the ocean.

It sank.

Let Bloom have it – maybe he could tweak infinity a bit and eradicate such things forever.

And then I was back in the TARDIS watching the Doctor. Grim. Determined.

Was I going home? I don’t mean home home. But at least the right universe? The Doctor seemed to think so. He didn’t remember too much about what had happened on the *Jonah* but he was certain that the shake-up had got reality back on the right track. Certain. Well, sure. Well, convinced. Well, look Anji it’s just been sorted out now leave me alone.

He wasn’t in the mood for talking. But for some reason, perhaps because we’d left Selonart behind, I felt calm. Well, calmer. Well. . .

I held Fitz’s hand and we waited.

Chapter Sixteen

He left them strict instructions: if anything should happen to affect the TARDIS in any way, they were to leave. If he was gone more than two hours, they were to leave. If they saw anyone else on the scanner but him, they were to leave.

Despite their attempts to follow, the Doctor finally walked out alone on to the gusty, barren mountainside. He was cradling a small, slightly tingling box.

There was death in the air, long and lingering. A sound, a mournful moan, as present and persistent as a migraine. This was a lonely surface, desolate and hopeless.

In the valley below, wrecked spaceships rusted. Their carcasses were surrounded by unintelligible, bilious runic patterns carved into the arid soil.

The Doctor turned and carried his box towards a gigantic cave. Metallic smoke issued from the opening's gaping maw.

They would know he was here. They would be waiting for him – worn sinewy curiosities insatiable and selfish – piqued by aeons of nothing. Whatever primeval power animated those wretched, centuries-old colonists was curious to the point of paranoia. It searched, greedy and needing, for a way out of its prison, not understanding that there was no way. The cosmos had moved on. They clung on, stagnant and malign, refusing change; hating their exile, hating the universe which had left them behind. Their only escape *was* change, the one act they could never accept.

A kilometre inside that rotten cave and a huge black wooden door blocked his path. A door that had been young when the universe was young, now as old and evil as the Warlocks it served. The black door was lined with webbed, bloodied spikes and more of those obscene runic symbols that seemed to violate and bend the vision beyond sanity. Carved faces leered out from thick grainy buttresses.

The Doctor waited patiently. As if making its mind up, the door shrieked as ancient ropes and pulleys forced it to rise. Ignoring the stench that leaked 213

Chapter Sixteen

214

out from the darkness beyond, the Doctor walked determinedly through and into the Warlock citadel.

They waited for him in a dark, vast throne room. He walked among them, the dead that lived and hated. His footsteps echoed on cracked, faded flag-stones.

They sat in dusty thrones; sitting out their perpetuity. Long glistening hands flexed impatiently, dry jaws shuddered and clacked. The atmosphere was one of barely repressed pandemonium, as if at any moment they would burst into hysterical movement.

The Doctor felt their gaze upon him as they stared. He felt their anger like a physical force; their fear too, the true motivation of the Warlocks. The ingrained greedy fear that had consumed their once human selves.

‘Why have you come here, to your death?’ asked a dry rustling voice. None of the Warlocks had seemed to speak.

‘I bring a gift for you.’ The Doctor held the box, carefully like a pet. He stood tall, emotionless.

‘A . . . trick.’

‘No trick. A genuine gift.’

Humourless laughter swirled in the rank air. ‘You. . . are the gift. Our plaything. . . ’

The Doctor closed his eyes and shook his head. ‘So predictable, so misguided. The centuries have blinded you, Warlocks.’

A pause. The Warlocks hissed their displeasure. ‘You. . . dare. . . ’

A grinding from above, from the distant roof. A box was lowering itself, suspended on iron chains. A cage.

A bloodied and wild-eyed Sabbath dangled inside that cage. The half-light revealed only some of the work that had been visited upon his body. He stared mutely down at the Doctor.

‘See how we pleasure ourselves. . . ’ The voice was triumphant, lilted with the currents of insanity. ‘You seek to bargain for his release?’

The Doctor remained expressionless. ‘I would not be so foolish as to believe you would honour any such bargain. As I say, I bring only a gift.’

The box jerked from his grip. He dropped his hands to his side. It floated slowly towards the ring of Warlocks.

‘Foolish?’ asked the voice. ‘You were a fool to come here. . . Doctor. . . ,’

'Perhaps. But the age of the Warlocks of Demigest is over. Your stain will not be permitted to enter the cosmos. You will learn this. I bring you the Chapter Sixteen

215

means of your deliverance.'

'Inn... a box?'

'Exactly. Now open it.'

'Because you say so?' The voice was angry, barely controlled. The Doctor heard the cold inhumanity powering its tones.

'Because that is all you have,' he replied. 'Now, open it Warlocks. Look and learn.'

He stood there, still and calm. A great pause descended over the immense room. No sound but a great stentorian breathing.

'OPEN IT!' commanded the Doctor.

Whether it was the Warlocks that lifted the lid on that floating casket, or some other force, as equal and as ancient, none could know. But open it did.

Despite themselves, the wizened bodies leaned forward, expectant and hungry. A glow, a luminous glow lit up the throne room. Leathery tongues licked lips.

The Doctor retreated slowly, eyes still on the ring of Warlocks. They were animated, confused, wary.

Suddenly, the box dropped to the floor and a blast of infinite matter streamed out from beneath its upturned lid. The Warlocks shrieked. The slushy particles grew geometric and unstoppable across the floor of the throne room.

'A trick!' screeched the voice, pumped full of self-righteous outrage.

'No trick,' replied the Doctor. 'Your only deliverance. I give you that which you went to Selonart to take. The path to infinity. You must follow it. The time has come for you to change.'

The skeletal shapes were panicking now, scrabbling for escape. The mass on the floor grew and grew. It seemed to stretch out globular

fingers and reach for each individual Warlock, smothering and overwhelming any feeble attempts to evade it.

'Doctor!' screamed the voice, knotted with fear.

Somewhere high above, an explosion of stones rocked the citadel. Dust began to fall like rain. Blocks began to grind in the walls, powdering and splintering. Age was catching up with Demigest.

The links holding Sabbath's dangling prison stretched and snapped. The cage dropped and crashed into the floor.

The Warlocks thrashed uselessly in the mass that claimed them. It was as if the infinity process was fed and augmented by the unchanging, primal forces Chapter Sixteen

216

that bound the bones of this blighted planet. Within minutes it had increased to fill the entire throne room. All was white light; punctuations of screaming skulls, swelling limbs, a smashed and empty cage, quickly subsumed in its totality.

Only a last cry of rage and betrayal echoed through the Warlocks' stronghold; a final wail of despair. 'Doctor! !' it snarled. The word rang forlornly round the citadel.

The Doctor himself? Well, he was long gone.

He reached the TARDIS, not bothering to look around at the grey desert surrounding him, or back towards the rumbling scene he had just resolved.

He stepped inside where Anji and Fitz were anxiously waiting for him.

'Is it over?' asked Anji.

Finally, the Doctor smiled. He stretched out his arms, as if waking from a long, long sleep. He wiggled his fingers and looked with delicious anticipation at the console in front of him. Looking for all the world like the conductor of a symphony orchestra about to commence the overture to some sweeping opera, he lowered his hands lovingly over the controls.

'Right,' he said. 'Where next?'

Anji and Fitz looked at each other. ‘Home,’ they both said at once.

Document Outline

- Cover
- Contents
- Prologue
- Chapter One
- Chapter Two
- Chapter Three
- Chapter Four
- Chapter Five
- Chapter Six
- Chapter Seven
- Chapter Eight
- Chapter Nine
- Chapter Ten
- Chapter Eleven
- Chapter Twelve
- Chapter Thirteen
- Chapter Fourteen
- Chapter Fifteen
- Chapter Sixteen

Table of Contents

- Prologue
- Chapter One
- Chapter Two
- Chapter Three
- Chapter Four
- Chapter Five
- Chapter Six
- Chapter Seven
- Chapter Eight
- Chapter Nine
- Chapter Ten
- Chapter Eleven
- Chapter Twelve
- Chapter Thirteen
- Chapter Fourteen
- Chapter Fifteen
- Chapter Sixteen